



An evaluation of the BBC / Nuffield prototype hybrid courses

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Relating to the
BBC Factual & Learning / Nuffield Languages Programme joint project
E-language learning for adults : a hybrid model

<http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/languages>

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Background to the report

The Nuffield Languages Programme and BBC Factual & Learning share a common aspiration - to widen participation in, and improve access to, adult language learning.

The Nuffield Languages Programme¹ is funded by the Nuffield Foundation, one of the UK's best known charitable trusts, to support the development of languages in the UK. It does so by supporting and encouraging a range of initiatives that help translate the Nuffield Languages Inquiry's recommendations into policy and practice.

BBC Factual & Learning has for many years produced courses for adults in a range of languages as part of its public service educational provision. It currently offers beginner level materials both on television and online. The BBC's languages website² has grown rapidly since its launch in 1996 to reflect increasing demand for online learning. As well as providing language learning resources to get people started, the BBC aims to help them follow up their interest by indicating learning opportunities outside the BBC. In this context, it is keen to enhance the usefulness of its courses by exploring how they can be linked more closely to local provision.

The Nuffield Languages Programme and BBC Factual & Learning therefore joined forces in May 2002 to explore the potential of e-learning in enhancing the opportunities for adults to learn languages. They set up an action research project to develop an innovative language learning model for adult beginners, combining the flexibility of online materials with opportunities for learners to interact with a tutor and with other learners.

The model was tested by running a prototype course in four areas with adults who wished to learn Spanish from scratch, with support but without committing to a traditional weekly course. Neil Selwyn and Nina Smalley evaluated the effectiveness of the prototype and produced this report of their findings.

Their report was presented at a consultation seminar at the Nuffield Foundation on 24 March 2003. The seminar's conclusions, together with feedback from tutors, providers and the project Steering Group, formed the basis of a wider report by the project team on e-language learning for adults. Copies can be obtained from The Nuffield Languages Programme, 28 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3JS, and both reports can be downloaded from <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/languages>

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Nuffield Languages Programme
May 2003

¹ <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/languages>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages>

Executive Summary

Introduction

The emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to a renewed interest in technology-based language learning. However, many expert commentators recognise that language learning does not effortlessly translate into 'e-learning' given the complex nature of what is being taught and learnt. From this perspective, it is beginning to be recognised that language learning is perhaps best suited to a *combined* approach of technology and face-to-face teaching and learning, where new technologies offer a potential for *adding value* to face-to-face teaching. This view mirrors current educational interest in the development of 'blended' or 'hybrid' educational situations where online learning is combined with human tutoring and where communications between learners and teachers are both face-to-face and facilitated by technology.

Given the potential advantages of hybrid language learning, BBC Factual & Learning in conjunction with the Nuffield Languages Programme developed an 'e-language learning for adults' prototype course, aiming to combine the provision of online language learning materials with sustained learner/tutor and learner/learner interaction and support. In the prototype, the pre-existing online Spanish for beginners course developed by BBCi, *Spanish Steps*, was offered to learners in conjunction with three face-to-face group classroom sessions. Alongside the website and classroom sessions, email and telephone support from a designated tutor and fellow learners were offered as well as extra online learning materials and resources developed specifically for the hybrid learners.

The evaluation of the prototype hybrid courses

The principal aim of the Cardiff University research team was to evaluate systematically the prototype hybrid course as implemented in four different sites, in terms of the following criteria:

- The *educational* effectiveness of the prototype in terms of its flexibility for learners and tutors, the appropriateness of the online content for the learner and tutor and the impact on learning outcomes and learner motivation;
- The *technological* effectiveness of the prototype in affording ready access to learning materials, facilitating communication and support between learners and their tutors;
- The *social* effectiveness of the prototype in facilitating a shared learning culture/community amongst participants, stimulating a disposition to participate in further learning and in overcoming existing barriers to learning (i.e. situational, institutional and dispositional).

In order to gauge the effectiveness of the prototype hybrid courses, a comparison group of autonomous internet-only learners also learning Spanish with the Spanish Steps website, was recruited. The evaluation used a combination of questionnaires, focus group interviews and individual telephone interviews with learners and tutors. In particular, the evaluation also aimed to examine the following areas:

- The nature of the learning experience for participants, how this was mediated by prior experience of learning, prior technological experience etc.;
- Pedagogical issues associated with the online/offline hybrid delivery, ease-of-fit of online and offline modes for learners and tutors;
- Examples of 'best practice' from the groups.

Evaluation sample

The four sites offering the prototype courses were selected to be diverse in terms of institutional background (i.e. one language learning college, one adult education college, one BBC Learning Centre and one distributed ICT learning centre) and geography (rural, town and city). Although in theory each site was to recruit 10 to 12 learners (henceforth referred to as 'hybrid learners'), in practice only 32 learners were recruited to the first group sessions. Similarly, although 70 'online' learners volunteered to participate in the comparison group in response to a request for volunteers on the BBC website, only 31 actually returned the initial questionnaires. The on-going ephemerality of the online learners, not all of whom were accessing the site from the UK, was a notable aspect of the evaluation - reflecting the non-committal manner in which many of the online learners appeared to approach the course. As such, the small numbers of hybrid and online learners who took part in the evaluation do compromise the generalisability of the findings as well as the sophistication of the data analysis. This limitation of the small numbers involved must be borne in mind throughout this report.

Findings

i) Learner characteristics

It was clear that the hybrid courses were attracting learners who, it is likely, would not have used the Spanish Steps website in a purely online capacity. When compared to the autonomous online learners, the hybrid learners were noticeably older, less well-educated and with a less extensive technological background. Both methods of learning were attracting individuals who tended to be (i) established learners and (ii) established language learners. In line with what we know about 'conventional' language learning courses, and in the light of how the learners were recruited, both the hybrid and online courses were tending to attract 'repeat learners' rather than absolute beginners. Thus, whilst the hybrid courses could not be said to have widened participation to learning in general, they would appear to have widened participation in e-learning activities.

ii) Learner motivation and recruitment

A range of motivations to learn Spanish was cited. Whereas the hybrid learners were more likely to be motivated by visiting Spain, buying property etc., the online learners were more likely to either have very specific work/emigration aims or were looking at Spanish learning from a purely general interest or general curiosity perspective. The motivations for taking the Spanish Steps course (in either hybrid or online form) as opposed to other Spanish courses also varied. Whilst more of the online learners were attracted by the ability to learn online, the hybrid learners were more likely to be attracted by the course's specific features (e.g. the fact that the course did not follow a rigid weekly structure whilst also not being a completely solitary distance learning course).

In this respect there was a sense that the hybrid courses were attracting some individuals who had previously found conventional adult language classes difficult to commit to - learners who could be referred to as 'tippers', because the nature of the course tipped them into starting to learn. The low institutional demands of the Spanish Steps courses (i.e. in terms of weekly attendance, time and money spent on the course, lack of formal assessment or end-of-course certification) were attractive to these learners. That said, some learners were attending the hybrid courses having tried and failed to enrol on 'traditional' courses in the same institution. This factor had implications for these learners' sustained use of, and commitment towards, the Spanish Steps course.

iii) Learners' use of the Spanish Steps website

The hybrid learners who followed the course through to the final classroom session were more successful than the autonomous online learners in completing the six stages of the Spanish Steps website, demonstrating the 'added value' of the classroom sessions in imposing a 'structure' in the learners' minds. In short, the hybrid model of online

learning with supporting classroom sessions allowed a group of learners to learn online at levels above and beyond what could be expected otherwise. In comparison, the online learners, who could be referred to as 'dippers', appeared to dip in and out of the website and use it more as an on-going resource than a course.

In terms of how learners used the website, the frequency of use was comparable between the two sets of learners, with most accessing the site on a weekly basis. Differences were apparent in terms of *when* the website was accessed by learners, with the online learners more likely to be evening users of the site. Hybrid learners, in contrast, were more likely to be lunchtime and morning users. Although learning could not be said to be taking place on a truly 24-hour basis, these patterns do reflect the flexibility of self-study and the '24/7' nature of the web. It must be stressed that these were typical patterns of use and, in most cases, were not sustained throughout the duration of the evaluation. After ten weeks many of the hybrid learners' use of the site tailed off - with some attending the final sessions having not used the site for a month or so. These patterns of use can also be linked to learners' motivation and discipline, with the most successful learners appearing to be those who managed to set themselves a 'regime' of use.

Both sets of learners predominantly reported to be accessing the website from home, followed by the workplace. Those hybrid learners who did not have home access to a computer and relied on the open access in learning centres were hindered by the public access facilities.

iv) Technical issues in learners' use of the Spanish Steps website

The technical problems most commonly cited by the learners related to video, sound and length of time spent downloading material. There would appear to have been several reasons for this: learners not used to accessing multi-media websites did not have the 'plug-ins' required to play the video and audio components of the site. Nor were they able to download them easily. In addition, as most of the learners accessed the site using a 56K modem, they were unprepared for the length of time they needed to stay online to use the course.

The technical difficulties seemed to be exacerbated in the public learning centres, where computers were not necessarily enabled to have sound (or had sound but not headphones), display video, handle state-of-the-art websites and where support staff were not familiar with the Spanish Steps site. Use of the website in public sites was also curtailed by non-technical factors, such as the limited time learners were able to use a computer (therefore limiting the flexibility of use) and the non-conducive environment to learning and practising speaking skills. For the most part, the elements of the site which learners were unable to use were quickly discarded and ignored on subsequent visits to the site.

v) Learners' evaluation of the Spanish Steps website

Aside from the technical difficulties, most, if not all, of the online and hybrid learners were impressed with the overall feel and presentation of the website. In this respect the website fulfilled a role as a motivating and engaging medium of learning. That said, there was a sense amongst some of the more experienced Spanish learners on the hybrid courses that they also wanted some 'traditional' language learning content - in particular more emphasis on formal grammar and the 'rules' of Spanish language. This, in part, reflects the level of the hybrid learners' prior experience of learning Spanish and the fact that some were taking the hybrid course as a substitute for a weekly classroom course. It may also relate to the age profile of the learners, reflecting changes in language teaching methodology over recent years (moving from what Milton, in *Literature Review in Languages 2002*³, calls a 'grammar translation model' to a 'communicative, task-based, problem solving approach').

³ <http://www.nestafuturelab.org/reviews/lang08.htm>

The tendency for 'non-beginners' to be using the Spanish Steps website and attending the hybrid courses was also reflected in the learners' evaluation of the difficulty levels of the website - with no learner reporting that they found the course too difficult for them.

vi) Use and evaluation of the Spanish Steps classroom sessions

The three classroom sessions – available to the hybrid learners only - were originally planned to run from October to December but there was some slippage and some had to be scheduled to run in the New Year. Overall levels of attendance diminished over time. At the first session, the hybrid learners were enthusiastic about the idea of attending sessions to sustain their motivation, seeing it as an important and valuable part of their learning experience. Yet the fact that a relatively high proportion of learners did not attend all the sessions suggests that these good intentions were not sustained. In this respect, a few of the non-attendees concluded that only weekly courses would create an obligation to attend.

Those learners who did attend the classroom sessions found them to be, on the whole, useful and motivating - allowing them to pace their learning and acting as a 'prompt' to those who were maybe losing momentum. Most learners seemed to welcome the chance to interact with the tutor and other learners, to demonstrate and reinforce their learning, as well as to correct any confusion that had occurred between the classes.

vii) Other forms of learning

A notable aspect of all four hybrid courses was the very limited use made of the tutor outside of the classroom sessions. Whilst the tutors were diligent in contacting learners by email and telephone, there was little reciprocal attempt made by learners to contact the tutor for support or speaking practice. Some learners were uneasy about telephoning the tutor, with learners not wanting to 'be a nuisance' or 'bother' the tutor. Other, more linguistically adept, students simply did not feel the need to contact the tutor, as all the language help they needed was contained in the website.

These low levels of use of the tutor and attendance at the sessions should be understood in terms of how learners were using the Spanish Steps course. Most of the hybrid learners were using self-learning materials such as textbooks and tapes alongside the website. Moreover, for some, the Spanish Steps course was being used as an adjunct to other 'traditional' classroom courses. In this respect Spanish Steps was an 'ideal' but not wholly compelling 'back-up'. Other learners were using Spanish Steps as a means of consolidating knowledge from previous attempts to learn Spanish and/or 'treading water' between classroom courses.

There was little evidence that 'learning communities' were being created outside the classroom. Although expressing a willingness to communicate with each other during the span of the course, there was little, if no, communication and self-help amongst the learners between the classroom sessions, although they obviously benefited from talking to each other during those sessions.

viii) Learner dropout

For many of the online and hybrid learners the lack of obligation and commitment involved in the course meant that Spanish Steps was a lower priority in their lives than other more pressing issues. People did not attend the classroom sessions and did not complete the six stages of the website for a range of reasons. At one extreme, some of the hybrid learners suffered serious personal and family bereavements and illnesses, which left Spanish Steps as a low priority. Other hybrid learners started the course with long holidays to Spain and America planned for December (hence their original attraction to a course which finished before Christmas). The situation obviously changed with the eventual slippage of the classroom sessions into the New Year. Other learners experienced lifestyle changes which meant that Spanish Steps was no longer convenient. These reasons ranged from having to spend extra time in work and/or changing work routines, which meant that accessing the website from work was no longer possible, to having concurrent Spanish classes cancelled leading to a drop in motivation.

There were signs that a few learners had signed up for the Spanish Steps hybrid courses without knowing the nature of the course. The use of the internet and the requirement to stay online while learning was obviously a deterrent to some, as was the use of the computers during some of the classroom sessions. Given the slightly rushed nature of some of the centres' enrolment of learners, it is clear that some learners felt that being given a clearer indication of what the course entailed before embarking on the course would have improved retention. There was also a sense of a lack of commitment and obligation towards the course amongst some of the learners given the lack of financial cost involved and the lack of weekly sessions. From this perspective the Spanish Steps prototype was something which was easily entered into and easily dropped.

ix) Learning outcomes

For those hybrid learners who finished the three classroom sessions, learning outcomes reflected the content of this Entry level course, i.e. primarily at the level of learning words and short phrases, as well as consolidating prior knowledge. Learners reported being most confident in simple greetings, saying a few words about themselves, reading a menu and buying railway tickets. These outcomes must be set against the fact that some learners were starting the course from a 'competent novice' rather than absolute beginner level.

It is also worth considering the Spanish Steps course in terms of the future activities of the learners who completed the course. Most of the learners who completed the final evaluation questionnaires intended to carry on using the Spanish Steps website. As such, it constituted a valuable reference resource and consolidation tool which could be used well beyond the final classroom session. Some online and hybrid learners intended to enrol on classroom Spanish courses. However, it is important to bear in mind that many had planned to do so (or were doing so) before they took part in Spanish Steps. It is therefore safer to conclude that Spanish Steps had not necessarily created a new desire in the learners to take subsequent courses, more that it was part of a much wider, already established 'learning journey'.

Discussion

As a whole it should be concluded that the 'e-language learning for adults' prototype was a qualified success. Aside from the technical problems experienced, those learners who followed the hybrid courses through to the third session were impressed with the Spanish Steps package and the classroom sessions offered alongside them. In hindsight it may well be that many of the 'negative' findings from this evaluation are to be expected and, indeed, some should be expected in the future. However, it is likely that if the issues surrounding recruitment and technical support are addressed, many of them could be allayed. One of the key conclusions to take away from the prototype courses is that the educational community needs to shift its expectations and assumptions about e-learning towards a more realistic basis. In particular five areas arise from the findings of the present evaluation:

i) Recognising how learners use e-learning and hybrid learning

It is necessary to recognise that these learners were using the Spanish Steps courses like any other learning resource and were not making best use of the 'new' forms of learning offered in the blend (such as email-based communication between learners and tutors). For this group, hybrid learning was perhaps less of a new, inherently motivating and engaging form of learning than another form of learning which learners added to their repertoire of learning sources. In this way, many of the learners were appropriating the Spanish Steps courses in established and 'traditional' ways. Spanish Steps seemed to play a supporting, rather than a guiding, role in individuals' learning. For some learners it could be seen as akin to a textbook which learners felt able to draw upon to consolidate prior learning. Although, in the long term, this gives Spanish Steps longevity as a learning tool, in the short term it would appear, crucially, that learners did not have the e-skills, self-discipline and the obligation or compulsion needed to complete the course. This led to learners not attending the classroom sessions, thus highlighting the inherent

tension in the hybrid model, which was not successfully resolved for some of the Spanish Steps learners, i.e. the difficulty of marrying a rigid structure of classroom sessions with a flexible model of online provision.

ii) Recognising the over-riding importance of motivation and obligation on the part of the learner

As with all adult learning, the key factor underlying the relative success of the Spanish Steps courses was the motivation and 'learning discipline' of the learners. Given that Spanish Steps did appear successful in attracting some learners who were unsure of taking part in traditional learning and were attracted by the flexible nature of the course (such as the small number of classroom sessions), it could be said that the courses had attracted people for whom they were not best suited. In terms of establishing and maintaining high levels of motivation in the learners, it appeared that there was little which could be done about this. It could, therefore, be argued that some learner 'dropout' from e-learning courses is accepted as an inevitable extension of the flexible ethos under which the courses are provided.

iii) Recognising discrepancies between 'low-technology' learners and 'high-technology' educational providers

There is a definite and widening gap between the technological ability of educational providers to develop 'high-tech' and 'high-spec' online learning materials and the relatively 'low-tech' resources which a number of learners and tutors have to access them (i.e. computer hardware/software and skills/experience). There is a danger that educational providers continue to over-estimate what learners are capable of using ICT for. Supporting these less experienced learners and teachers and giving them every assistance to overcome the technological barriers is an important responsibility for the providers to take on.

iv) Importance of getting institutional factors right in the hybrid learning model

It should be also remembered that there are key institutional effects on hybrid courses such as this prototype Spanish Steps course. Indeed, the institutions in which the courses were delivered had a key influence on the effectiveness of the courses. Factors which were perhaps overlooked in the development of the prototype proved, with hindsight, to be crucial. For example, the different ways in which the institutions enrolled the learners, the times of day the sessions were provided, the time allowed to the tutor, and the conditions of learning during the sessions were all key factors in the attraction and retention of learners to the courses, as well as in introducing the learners to the online resources and framing their subsequent use.

v) Increasing rather than widening participation

There is a tension throughout the current e-learning agenda between merely *increasing* levels of participation in education and *widening* levels of participation in education. There was evidence that the Spanish Steps hybrid courses were increasing levels of education by attracting learners who would not have learnt via the website otherwise. However, there was little to suggest that participation was being widened to include other disadvantaged groups. This reflects the emerging consensus in the academic literature that there are more fundamental problems to participation in education than purely technical and infrastructural issues. Of concern here is that the overwhelming attention being paid to ICT may be acting as a distraction or impediment to more prosaic (but arguably more effective) interventions aimed at altering patterns of poverty and social disadvantage, or encouraging rather than destroying non-certificated learning opportunities. We therefore need to be realistic about what ICT can and cannot be expected to achieve if we are to harness its educational potential.

Concluding questions

The evaluation findings raise issues that will benefit from further exploration beyond the scope of this particular project.

- Although hybrid courses like Spanish Steps appear successful in widening participation in e-learning, how can hybrid learning be developed to widen *rather than increase* participation in language learning and learning in general?
- How does this hybrid model of online and offline provision need to be changed to make it more effective?
- What institutional conditions would enable hybrid language learning courses like Spanish Steps to work well in the future?
- What is the most effective balance between the flexibility of e-learning and the imposed structure of traditional language learning models, bearing in mind that the requirements of the learner should be central to the process?
- To what extent can e-learning be expected to impact upon people's existing motivation and disposition towards language learning? How else can government and providers positively impact upon people's motivation and disposition towards learning in general and language learning in particular?

Section 1 : E-language learning for adults

Introduction

Information and communications technology (ICT) has quickly become an educational hot topic over the last decade. Encouraged by the rapid growth of internet use in many areas of business, leisure and other public sectors, educationalists around the world have been quick to herald ICT as a transformatory arena for both compulsory and post-compulsory education and training. For many commentators, ICT-based learning is seen as a particularly dynamic means of facilitating adult education - offering increased reach, motivation, impact and value for money (LSC DELG 2002).

Recently ICT-based learning has been seen in more specific terms as e-learning - defined by the recent Morrison e-learning taskforce as "learning with the help of information and communications technology tools. These tools may include the internet, intranets, wireless networking, PC (personal computer) based technologies, handheld computers, interactive TV and also e-technology to support traditional delivery for example using electronic whiteboards and video conferencing" (DfES 2002a, p.2).

E-learning has been welcomed by educationalists and policymakers for a variety of reasons. Firstly it is seen as enhancing the learning experience (Pérez Cereijo et al. 2002). For example, internet-based education is seen as allowing learners the opportunity to access a wider range of learning resources and communicate with other learners regardless of proximity. From this basis, much has been made of the internet's potential to create active and empowered communities of learners who are more motivated and effective as a result (e.g. Haythornthwaite et al. 2000).

Yet e-learning's primary attraction for learners is seen to be one of convenience (Pérez Cereijo et al. 2002). In particular, using technology to deliver education on an 'anyplace, anypace' basis arguably frees adult education from the barriers that previously prevented participation. Barriers to learning, whether they are categorised as cultural, structural and personal (Maxted 1999) or situational, institutional, and dispositional (Harrison 1993), are now seen as resolvable through the use of technology. Thus, as the Morrison taskforce conclude, e-learning is a substantively new form of learning for the twenty-first century:

"E-learning is a relatively new tool with the potential to radically improve participation and achievement rates in education. Benefits include: the ability to customise learning to the needs of an individual and the flexibility to allow the individual to learn at their own pace, in their own time and from a physical location that suits them best. This could be in their local library, at their work or at home. Through e-learning we have the opportunity to provide universal access to high quality, relevant training and education." (DfES 2002a, p.4)

1.2 E-learning and adult language learning

Of course the combination of new technologies and education is not a recent development for language educators. Language learning has always involved a range of educational technologies - from radio broadcasts to film and video. However, the emergence of new information and communication technologies with their emphasis on interactive (rather than broadcast) modes of communication has led to a renewed interest in technology-based language learning. The potential of the speech recognition software is obvious, as is the potential of the internet to

allow learners access to a range of target language resources and, indeed, the opportunity to interact with other learners and native speakers.

However, many expert commentators recognise that language learning does not effortlessly translate into e-learning, given the complex nature of what is being taught and learnt:

“Learning a foreign language may be the biggest, most complex and most difficult task any learner will consciously undertake. Because it combines explicit learning of vocabulary and language rules with unconscious skill development in the fluent application of these things, learning a language is quite different from any other subject.” (Milton 2002, p.6)

Above all, language learning is acknowledged to be an inherently social activity - particularly in terms of situational, oral and communicative language learning where learners are given meaningful exposure to the use of a language with other speakers. Thus whilst technology can be applied easily to some elements of language learning (in particular the development of comprehension skills) it is less easily applied to the development of the productive skills, particularly speaking. Thus, although the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is now long established, the initial period of euphoria about the possibilities of language learning via technology has been followed by an equally extreme backlash, with the result that “online learning is being more closely scrutinised than classroom teaching ever was.” (Felix 2002)

1.3 Hybrid learning and the BBC/Nuffield Spanish Steps model

From this perspective, it is beginning to be recognised that language learning is perhaps best suited to a combined approach of technology and face-to-face teaching and learning where “new technologies offer great potential for adding value to face-to-face teaching” (Felix 2002, emphasis added). As Milton (2002, p.24) again argues, “technology-led materials rarely provide the language practice needed for progress, and pedagogy-led materials are either so technologically simple, or tedious, they that likewise fail to provide the desired result. A more systematic and better thought out combining of technological and pedagogical expertise is likely to produce much better results”.

This view feeds into current educational interest in the development of ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ educational situations where online learning is combined with human tutoring and where communications between learners and teachers may be face-to-face or facilitated by technology (De Freitas 2002, Franks, 2002). For example, the Campaign for Learning’s recent survey of e-learning showed that the majority of e-learners want some form of support alongside their online learning (Campaign for Learning 2002). In theory hybrid teaching and learning combine the best aspects of traditional education with the best parts of technology in order to create a rich learning environment, with new courses being developed that reduce the amount of classroom time by offering a significant amount of the learning activities online:

“New approaches provide small ‘chunks’ of learning, delivered using high-quality, well-designed materials, which make effective use of sound and pictures, as well as text. They are available to the learner at times and places - such as the home or workplace - convenient to them. Learners can be well supported by a mixture of staff with an appropriate spread of expertise, and by opportunities for learners to work with each other. These methods should be combined with other more traditional approaches in the right blend, to meet the needs of the individual learner.” (LSC DELG 2002, p.1)

Given the potential advantages of hybrid language learning, BBC Factual & Learning in conjunction with the Nuffield Languages Programme developed an 'e-language learning for adults' initiative aiming to combine the provision of online language learning materials with sustained learner/tutor and learner/learner interaction and support. In this particular project, the pre-existing Spanish Steps online Spanish for beginners course developed by BBCi was offered to learners in conjunction with three face-to-face group classroom sessions. Alongside the website and classroom sessions, email and telephone support from a designated tutor and fellow learners was offered, as well as extra online learning materials and resources developed specifically for the hybrid learners.

By combining an established online Spanish for Beginners course with classroom and distance learning activities, the BBC/Nuffield prototype potentially overcomes one of the critical barriers presently faced by e-learning identified by the recent DfES (2002) 'Success for All' consultation document, i.e. the limited availability of high quality content. Of particular interest was the prototype's offering of a designated tutor who would be accessible to learners throughout the duration of the course, as well as facilitating the three classroom sessions. This use of human support for online learners has long been argued to be a desirable addition to conventional online learning provision, providing support, motivation and - in the case of language learning - a target language speaker for language reinforcement and guidance:

"The availability of instructors at certain times for telephone contact will aid in removing potential elements of despair, help students in overcoming difficulties as they arise, and give impetus to the student to continue with courses of study." (Chen 1997, p.35)

By addressing these theoretical issues practically, the 'e-language learning for adults' project marks an innovative and bold attempt to apply hybrid learning theories to language learning. How the project worked in practice forms the basis for the remainder of this report.

1.4 Research Questions

The prototype project was intended to run for a twelve-week period (September-December 2002). Four groups of learners were to have access to online learning materials in the form of six discrete units of work, as well as email and telephone support from their designated tutor and fellow learners. Additional learning materials were developed on a website funded by the Cheshire County Council's Adult Learning service and made available to teachers and learners. Learners were also to have three face-to-face classroom sessions as a group with the tutor during the twelve-week period.

The principal aim of the Cardiff University evaluation was to systematically evaluate the prototype course in terms of the following criteria:

- The *educational* effectiveness of the prototype in terms of its flexibility for learners and tutors, the appropriateness of the online content for the learner and tutor; impact on learning outcomes and learner motivation;
- The *technological* effectiveness of the prototype in affording ready access to learning and assessment materials, facilitating communication and support between learners and their tutors;
- The social effectiveness of the prototype in facilitating a shared learning culture/community amongst participants, stimulating a disposition to participate in further learning and in overcoming existing barriers to learning (i.e. situational, institutional and dispositional).

In order to gauge the effectiveness of the prototype 'hybrid' courses, a comparison group of autonomous internet-only learners also learning Spanish with the Spanish Steps website, was recruited. This comparative element of the

evaluation was designed to allow more generic conclusions to be reached regarding the effectiveness of the prototype model and subsequent changes which should/could be made to it. The evaluation therefore aimed to provide valuable quantitative and qualitative feedback on this hybrid form of online/offline provision from the points of view of the learners and tutors themselves. In particular the evaluation also aimed to examine the following areas:

- The nature of the learning experience for participants; how this was mediated by prior experience of learning, prior technological experience etc.;
- Pedagogical and assessment issues associated with the online/offline hybrid delivery; ease-of-fit of online and offline modes for learners and tutors;
- Examples of 'best practice' from the groups.

Section 2 : Evaluation Methods

2.1 Sample

The evaluation focused on the groups of hybrid learners and their tutors in four sites – Birmingham, Cheshire, Essex and Stoke and a comparison group of autonomous online learners:

'Hybrid' learners	Following prototype Spanish beginners course via website - with repeated online and telephone support from tutor, as well as three face-to-face meetings as a group.	Site 1 (n=6) [plus 3 who did not attend the first session but were met separately by the tutor. Did not attend any other sessions]
		Site 2 (n=13)
		Site 3 (n=7)
		Site 4 (n=6)
'Online' learners	Online learners using Spanish Steps website course with no formal support	n=31

Although in theory each hybrid learning site was to recruit 10 to 12 learners (henceforth referred to as 'hybrid learners'), in practice only 32 learners were recruited to the first group sessions. Similarly, although 70 'online learners' volunteered to participate in the comparison group, in response to a request for volunteers on the BBC website, only 31 actually returned the initial questionnaires. The on-going ephemerality of the online learners, not all of whom were accessing the site from the UK, was a notable aspect of the evaluation - reflecting the non-committal manner in which many of the online learners appeared to approach the course (and it followed, the evaluation of the course). As such the small numbers of hybrid and online learners who took part in the evaluation compromise the generalisability of the findings as well as the sophistication of the data analysis. Therefore the limitations of using such a small sample should be borne in mind throughout this report.

2.2 The Research Sites

The four sites were chosen on the basis of their diversity in terms of institutional background (i.e. one language learning college, one adult education college, one BBC Learning Centre and one distributed ICT learning centre) and geography (rural, town and city locations). Whilst all of the centres, learners and tutors will be anonymised/pseudonomised during the presentation of data (sections 3 and 4), brief descriptions of the sites are now given to provide context for the evaluation's findings:

Birmingham

The Brasshouse Language Centre in the centre of Birmingham is a one-stop shop catering for all adults' language needs. It offers part-time daytime, evening and weekend courses from beginners to post-degree levels. It encompasses MFL, EFL, Business Language Services and Translation, Interpreting and Access to Information Services. The MFL department teaches around 5000 adults every year in one of the 28 languages taught. The Birmingham Spanish Steps classroom sessions were offered on Tuesday evenings between 6.30pm and 9.30pm.

Cheshire

The Cheshire centre, called No Limits, is situated in a rural community in South West Cheshire and is based on the same site as a high school which has been a specialist Languages College since 1996. The No Limits Centre caters for all adults in the community within a 15-mile radius of the centre. It offers 60 PCs on site with radiowave technology and outreach to up to 12 community and village halls to increase the opportunities for access to ICT for all. The ethos of the centre is to promote the widest possible range of learning opportunities through ICT to the community, thus removing the barrier of rural isolation from many aspects of learning. The Cheshire Spanish Steps classroom sessions were offered on Thursday evenings between 6pm and 9pm.

Essex

Mid Essex Adult Community College is one of nine Essex County Council maintained former 'external institutions', serving Brentwood, Billericay and Ongar. Apart from the main Bishops Hill site, the college offers provision mostly in community locations - mainly schools and village halls. They have in excess of 7,500 enrolments annually and offer a language curriculum offering 42 language courses in French, German, Greek, Italian and Spanish. All programmes run for 30 weeks for two hours per week and are accredited; students can progress from complete beginners to advanced. The Essex Spanish Steps classroom sessions were offered on Saturday mornings between 9.30am and 12.30.

Stoke

The BBC Open Centre is located inside BBC Radio Stoke, in Hanley town centre, and is open daily to members of the public as a drop-in learning centre. There are 16 computers in total, including 4 in the reception area where people can come in and surf the net for free, and 12 in the adjoining Learning Centre where people can sign up for all sorts of courses ranging from 'Computers for Beginners' to learning how to create their own website. They also run a variety of creative taster sessions, usually on a Wednesday afternoon, where students get the chance to try out something a little bit different, like building robots or gardening with Alan Titchmarsh. BBC Open Centres aim to connect closely with the community and offer better value for licence fee payers. The Stoke Spanish Steps classroom sessions were offered on Thursday afternoons between 2pm and 5pm.

2.3 Evaluation Methods

In order to collect a broad range of quantitative and qualitative data from these distributed learners the main data collection strategies were repeated questionnaires and face-to-face interviews (both focus group and individual). This research strategy involved:

i) Baseline and end-of-project questionnaires

Baseline and end-of-project data were collected in relation to four broad areas of questioning:

- *demographic data* (e.g. learners' age, gender, socio-economic status, disability, first language *etc.*);
- *technological data* (learners' previous experience of and attitudes towards ICT, access to ICT *etc.*);
- *educational data* (e.g. learners' previous educational histories and experience of online and linguistic learning, *etc.*);
- *participation in current course* (*before course*: learners' motivation for current participation, expectations of course, preferred outcomes; *after course*: learners' experiences and perceptions of course, perceived outcomes - linguistic competence, confidence, motivation for further participation in online and offline learning *etc.*).

ii) Within course 'progress' questionnaires

Shorter questionnaire instruments were developed for the hybrid and online learners to complete whilst the course was running. These consisted of a number of closed questions concerning the learners' perception of progress made so far and specific facilitators of, and impediments to, learning (e.g. technological, pedagogical and social). The questionnaires concluded with an open-ended section allowing learners to feed comments back as the course progressed. These questionnaires were made available online both via the world wide web and email for the internet learners.

iii) (Face-to-face) focus group interviews with students

It was important to include an element of face-to-face data collection given the limitations of the previously outlined 'remote' data collection techniques. Focus group interviews were therefore carried out with learners involved in the prototype groups during their first and last group sessions. These focus groups were intended to facilitate and generate broad discussion of issues arising from the questionnaire data.

Focus group interviews with six or seven learners at a time allowed for all of the learners on each prototype project course to be interviewed. Interviews lasted up to 40 minutes and were moderated by a member of the evaluation team. Time was given to explore each issue in-depth and those issues that were pertinent to each particular group.

iv) In-depth telephone interviews with tutors

Given the importance of the tutor in the online learning experience, in-depth telephone interviews with tutors on the four prototype courses were also carried out at the end of the courses. These interviews allowed for technical and pedagogical feedback from the perspective of the tutor, as well as exploring the demands made on the tutor from a hybrid form of online/offline delivery.

2.4 Procedure

It was intended that the hybrid learner sessions were all to run simultaneously for a 12-week period from September to December 2002, with the online learners evaluated alongside them. For a range of institutional reasons all four courses started later than planned (in either October or November 2002) and did not hold their final sessions until December 2002, January 2003 or March 2003. These slippages undoubtedly affected the prototype project in terms of diminishing numbers of learners attending (especially after the Christmas period) and made comparisons with the online learners difficult. Indeed, both groups of hybrid and online learners suffered from considerable 'attrition' throughout the evaluation. Thus, for the purposes of the post-course evaluation, learner responses from the mid-session progress questionnaires were combined with those learners who did complete the final sessions.

Section 3 : Results

3.1 Learner characteristics

When we look at the characteristics of the online and hybrid learners it is clear that the two groups differ. For example, just over two thirds of the online learners were female (n=21), whereas just over half of the hybrid learners were female (n=14). The hybrid learners were also noticeably older than the online sample (see table 3.1.1), with over half over the age of fifty. Crucially, 20 out of the 30 online learners disclosing their educational background were educated to first-degree level and above - whereas over half of the hybrid learners were educated to GCSE level or below. Whilst this discrepancy is, in part, associated with the relative age differences between the two samples, it would seem that the hybrid courses were attracting a markedly different group of learners from those following the Spanish Steps course online.

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
20 or under	-	2
21-30	-	8
31-40	6	10
41-50	8	6
51-60	12	5
61 and over	6	-

Table 3.1.1. Age of learners

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
No qualifications	7	1
GCSEs, GNVQs, O-levels or equivalent	9	5
A-levels, GNVQ Advanced, OND or equivalent	7	4
First degree	5	11
Post-graduate qualifications, Higher degrees (Masters, PhD)	3	9

Table 3.1.2. Learners' educational background

Although not the primary intention of the prototype project, whether or not the hybrid courses could claim to be widening participation in learning is uncertain. This issue is worth considering given the government's repeated "commitment to widen participation and meet the needs of disadvantaged people" (DfES 2002b, p.4). In terms of socio-economic status (using occupational category as a proxy), ethnic background and disability, the make-up of the two groups was similar except for the over-representation of retired persons in the hybrid sample. Moreover, there was little evidence that either the online or hybrid courses were attracting learners who had been previously

excluded from education (although there were obviously exceptions to this, as can be seen in the 'Learner vignettes' section on pages 59-61).

Instead we can conclude from the questionnaire data that both methods of learning were attracting individuals who tended to be (i) established learners and (ii) established language learners. For example, 26 of the hybrid learners (and 26 of the online learners) had previously taken part in other adult education courses or training. Whereas for some people this predominantly took the forms of work-based training, some of the hybrid learners were self-confessed learning 'addicts' who had a long history of courses, with Spanish Steps being the latest in a long line of learning 'challenges':

[Learner A] I've done lots of evening classes in upholstery, sewing, oh gosh- boring, boring! What else have I done that's more exciting - landscape and that sort of thing, painting. I've done an advanced food hygiene certificate course....

[Int] You've done quite a lot then...

[Learner A] Yes, but I think learning a language is a very difficult proposition because you've got to learn the vocabulary, learn to communicate, think on your feet and when I came in someone said 'foreign word' and I thought I must know a word and I couldn't think of a single one so I just smiled! You feel frustrated instantly because you haven't got that inside you.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

Both forms of the course attracted students who were already at least moderately experienced language learners. Indeed, 19 of the 32 hybrid learners and 26 out of the 31 internet learners had taken a language course before.

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
French	13	19
Spanish	13	11
German	3	8
Italian	-	1
Others	4	6

Table. 3.1.3. Languages previously studied by learners.

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
I can get by with the basics, e.g. buying a cup of coffee	13	10
I can hold short conversations with people	5	11
I can cope confidently in most situations	1	1
I speak the language fluently	-	3

Table. 3.1.4. Levels of language competence previously achieved by learners.

As can be seen from table 3.1.3, 13 of the 32 hybrid learners had studied Spanish before. Whilst in two of the centres this was partially due to the way in which the sessions had been initially advertised (e.g. as an 'online Spanish course' rather than 'Spanish for Beginners'), many of these individual learners intimated that taking another beginners' Spanish course was a conscious decision to consolidate and reinforce previous learning. In many ways (and in line with what we know about 'conventional' language learning courses) both the hybrid and online courses were tending to attract 'repeat learners' rather than absolute beginners. Whilst this is to be expected it did, as we shall see in later sections, have a significant impact on how the course was used by learners and the outcomes reached:

[Learner A] We've been dabbling on and off [with Spanish courses] for years but never really got a grip on it. So now we've decided to really give it a go. We've just this week bought a home out there... well, it isn't built yet... but we want to be able to hold a conversation.

[Site Two - Initial Group Interview]

Even when learners had not formally studied Spanish before, some still had considerable experience of learning other languages and a familiarity with Spain and Spanish culture:

[Learner A] It's sort of more in front of my doorstep more or less. My husband is working in Spain at the moment; I'm planning on going there in five weeks time. I'm German; I've lived in France and didn't really manage to pick up the language that easily, particularly in pronunciation. I think Spanish will be a bit easier because of my German accent. I speak Italian as well so I thought I'd give it a go.

[Site One - Initial Group Interview]

[Learner A] When this happened and we were able to join this class we thought it would be a good way to brush up because we are going back every year for a month.

[Int] So how long did you live out there for?

[Learner A] Nearly eight years.

[Int] So, have all of you been to Spain before then?

[All] Yes.

[Int] How many times have you been there then? Is it something you regularly do?

[Learner B] Quite a lot. Because I was so interested I went to a little village last year and I was able to speak with them. I decided I was going to take as many courses as I could.

[Int] I was going to ask, have any of you ever done Spanish courses before?

[Learner B] I do one every year. [...]

[Learner C] I've done the college course.

[Int] You've done the college course as well.

[Learner D] That was a few years ago. It's too hard really, you've got to buy the books. It's just too expensive to carry on; it's well over a hundred pounds for both of us.

[Site Two - Initial Group Interview]

Finally, it is worth noting the varied technological background of the learners attracted to the Spanish Steps courses. Whilst the online learners were, perhaps unsurprisingly, more used to using the internet for a wider range of purposes for longer periods of time than the hybrid learners (see tables 3.1.5 and 3.1.6), it is pertinent to note that both groups of learners were relying primarily on telephone line-based internet access at home. Indeed, all but five of the hybrid learners had access to a computer at home. This left a minority of hybrid learners (in particular those using the BBC Learning Centre) who could only access a computer in a public site or workplace.

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
To find information	29	30
To communicate with people	22	30
To listen to music/radio	5	22
To watch video clips	6	15
To send emails	29	31
To play games	8	17
To do word processing	27	30

Table 3.1.5. What do learners use computers for?

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
Less than 10 minutes	4	-
Between 10 minutes and half an hour	6	4
Between half an hour and an hour	10	12
One to two hours	11	6
More than two hours	1	9

Table 3.1.6. When using the internet how long do you usually spend online?

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
Home	25	30
At a friend's or relative's	3	10
Work	19	21
Local Centre (e.g. library)	6	7
College	3	4
BBC Learning Centre	3	-

Table 3.1.7. Where do you use computers?

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
Telephone line	22	20
ISDN connection	-	2
Broadband connection	8	7
Other	-	1
Don't know	2	1

Table 3.1.8. What type of connection to the internet does the computer you usually use have?

Despite these ostensibly high levels of access to ICT it was notable how 'low tech' both samples' use of ICT was. At one extreme were some of the hybrid learners who had only very recently been using computers:

[Learner A] We can't use a computer because we are in sheltered housing.

[Learner B] We are trying to get a computer but if we want it we can either come here [to the Learning Centre] or go to the library. [...]

[Learner A] We knew nothing. This is only our first go on the computer.

[Learner B] We've been coming a fortnight.

[Learner A] This is our third time and we find it a bit hard to get in but apart from that...

[Site Two - Initial group interview]

Yet in both the online and hybrid samples, many learners could be classified as only moderate users of computers. The majority of the hybrid sample and a third of the online sample preferred, for example, to receive the evaluation questionnaires on paper through the post rather than as email attachments. As we shall see, people's limited use of ICT had profound effects on how the course was used (and not used). Interestingly, despite the high levels of prior learning in both samples, only eight of the online learners and five of the hybrid learners had previously undertaken a course which involved using the internet to learn.

3.2 Learner motivation and recruitment

Before going on to describe the learners' evaluation and experiences of the course itself, it is also worth considering briefly the motivations for their participation. In terms of what was motivating the learners to learn Spanish, a range of reasons was cited. Whereas the hybrid learners were more likely to be motivated by visiting Spain, buying property, *etc.*, online learners were more likely to either have very specific work/emigration aims or were looking at Spanish learning from a purely general interest or general curiosity perspective.

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
Holiday	15	8
General interest	20	18
Family/friends in Spain	9	7
Work	-	4
Plan to/live in Spain (or Spanish- speaking country)	5	4

Table 3.2.1. What are your main reasons for wanting to learn Spanish with the Spanish Steps course?

The motivations for taking the Spanish Steps course (in either hybrid or online form) as opposed to other Spanish courses were more varied (table 3.2.2). Whilst more of the online learners were attracted by the ability to learn online, the hybrid learners were more likely to be attracted by the courses' specific features (i.e. the fact that it was not either a completely solitary or weekly course).

	Hybrid (n=32)	Online (n=31)
I like the idea of being able to learn when it suits me	26	26
I prefer not to learn completely on my own	9	N/A
I liked the idea of using the internet to learn	11	18
I prefer not to have to go to a class every week	10	4

Table 3.2.2. What attracted you to this way of learning?

For some of the hybrid learners, the fact that the Spanish Steps courses were not 'traditional' adult education courses in 'traditional' adult educational institutions was also appealing:

[Learner A] I liked the idea of going somewhere that wasn't a college. Colleges, schools, universities... they smell funny... I'm not comfortable there. I liked the idea of being able to study at work, wherever... and then come in somewhere like this [Learning Centre].

[Site Two - Initial Group Interview]

[Learner A] I saw it in the local paper and I got the impression it would be a beginners' course but a lot of the other classes are filled with women who only care about their coffee and in a two-hour class you go there and before an hour is up, we're all tucking into biscuits, you know, and then we have a twenty-minute break and they've all been doing these courses for years. There's no drive. That sounds a bit patronising but that's my image of them, the one- or two-hour meetings.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

For others the hybrid course offered the opportunity to increase computer literacy skills whilst also learning Spanish:

[Learner A] I'm not very good on the internet either so I thought it was killing two birds with one stone... I think I'm quite afraid of the internet.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

Issues of flexibility, the promised short nature of the course, were also attractive to some of the hybrid learners:

[Learner A] The thing that I liked about it is that it is just 12 weeks and a lot of the things you look at are 30 weeks. I don't know where I'll be in January anyway.

[Site One - Initial Group Interview]

[Learner A] Coming on other courses it has been very difficult to commit to every Tuesday evening or Thursday, whatever, and inevitably know that for whatever reason you'll miss three hours some weeks, so this seems to be a nice ideal balance.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

From this respect there was a sense that the hybrid courses were attracting some individuals who were finding conventional adult language classes difficult to commit to - learners who could be referred to as 'tippers' because they were tipped into learning by the particular nature of the courses. As such the low institutional demands of the Spanish Steps courses (i.e. in terms of weekly attendance, time and money spent on course, lack of formal assessment or end of course certification) were attractive to these learners:

[Learner A] Well, every time I come back from a Spanish holiday, I guess I must have been there over a dozen times over the past six or seven years, every single time I come back I say 'I'm going to learn Spanish', and that would mean looking for a Spanish course that would be permitting in terms of time. So my wife ripped this out of the paper and I thought it sounded like a terrific idea. I thought if I booked for something else or for whatever reason I couldn't keep that continuity it would fall apart but here there's no problem and it's a fantastic place.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

That said, some of the learners were attending courses precisely because they could not enrol on conventional classroom course in their local colleges - with two sites using the Spanish Steps course to enrol learners who had

originally tried to enrol on 'traditional' courses. This factor needs to be considered during our later discussions of learner use of and commitment to the Spanish Steps prototype course:

[Int] Why are you doing Spanish Steps instead of going to the college?

[Learner A] I'm also doing that. They didn't have enough people for their class so when the opportunity arose here, I took it.

[Int] So, would you prefer coming every week?

[Learner A] I would like to because I find what I learn, I like to be reminded the next week. But I've done that with the others and hopefully I could do that on the internet with myself.

[Int] What about you, **[Learner B]**?

[Learner B] I would prefer [a college course] yes, if I want to learn it.

[Site One - Initial Group Interview]

"It got off to a bad start in that I think that the learners that were recruited were perhaps recruited just because they were there without really being necessarily the most appropriate people to recruit. I think that if we had been able to have a broader perspective of learners then that would have helped. We just ended up with people who we knew vaguely wanted to learn Spanish and might be interested in supplementing it with Spanish Steps and that was the way that it was approached."

[Tutor Site Four - End of Course Interview]

Finally, in terms of the recruitment of learners, the online learners were predominantly recruited from the BBCi website or, more specifically, the BBC languages website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/languages> (table 3.2.3). Word of mouth and general use of the internet accounted for only 5 of the online learners. Conversely, as can be seen in Table 3.2.4, the hybrid learners were recruited via a range of techniques often specific to their centre (e.g. the BBC Learning Centre advertising on the local radio station, posters in the adult and language colleges, newspaper advertisements in the rural, distributed learning centre).

By chance while surfing the BBCi website	13
During one of my visits to the BBC languages website	11
Whilst surfing the web generally, e.g. using a search engine	3
Someone told me	2
Advert in paper	1
Saw BBC languages website advertised on TV	1

Table. 3.2.3. Online learners' methods of finding out about Spanish Steps website (n=31)

By chance while surfing the BBCi website	1
Someone told me	5
Advert in paper	3
Poster/leaflet	6
Radio	11
Offered it by college as alternative	2
Other*	4

*Other includes: asked to help out with the prototype for the BBC

Table 3.2.4. Hybrid learners' methods of finding out about Spanish Steps courses (n=32)

3.3 Learners' use of the Spanish Steps website

Moving on to which elements of the Spanish Steps website were used by both sets of learners, it is interesting to note that the hybrid learners were more likely to follow the course through to its final stage, with higher levels of completion of stages four, five and six than their online counterparts. In terms of using different elements of the website, similar patterns were apparent in both samples, with the cultural fact files, video and language notes being used by slightly fewer learners than the other elements of the site.

	Have looked at some or all units on this stage	Have attempted some units on this stage	Have completed all units on this stage
Stage 1: Finding your feet	-	1	21
Stage 2: Night out	-	4	17
Stage 3: Shopping	-	3	15
Stage 4: At home	-	2	12
Stage 5: Moving on	3	2	10
Stage 6: Work and play	3	1	10

Table 3.3.1. What units of the Spanish Steps course have you looked at or attempted?

[Hybrid learners n=22]

	Have used a little	Have used a lot
Snapshots	3	17
Video	7	12
Build your vocabulary activity	2	18
Your turn	4	15
Challenge	3	16
Cultural Fact files	6	8
Language notes	6	11
Materials on the CheshireNetwork website	5	1

Table 3.3.2. What elements of the Spanish Steps website have you used?

[Hybrid learners n=22]

	Have looked at some or all units on this stage	Have attempted some units on this stage	Have completed all units on this stage
Stage 1: Finding your feet	1	2	15
Stage 2: Night out	1	4	12
Stage 3: Shopping	2	4	10
Stage 4: At home	1	4	8
Stage 5: Moving on	3	6	4
Stage 6: Work and play	2	3	4

Table 3.3.3. What units of the Spanish Steps course have you looked at or attempted?

[Online learners n=18]

	Have used a little	Have used a lot
Snapshots	0	15
Video	1	10
Build your vocabulary activity	1	16
Your turn	0	16
Challenge	3	13
Cultural Fact files	4	11
Language notes	2	11

Table 3.3.4. What elements of the Spanish Steps website have you used?

[Online learners n=18]

In terms of how learners used the website, we can see from Table 3.3.5 that frequency of use was comparable between the two sets of learners, with most accessing the site on a weekly basis. Again it must be borne in mind that these data were collected from those learners who did not 'drop out' of the course. There was evidence that many of the online learners were, at best, occasional browsers of the site (with two members of the original online sample responding by saying that they would be happy to take part if they could be reminded of the Spanish Steps URL - suggesting a lack of sustained use of the site).

Differences were apparent in terms of when the website was accessed by learners, with the online learners more likely to be evening users of the site. Hybrid learners, in contrast, were more likely to be lunchtime and morning users. This, in part, can be attributed to the different types of people in each group - with the hybrid learners more likely to be retired, and, to a lesser extent, to be accessing a computer from work or a public site and therefore more amenable to day-time use. Although learning could not be said to be taking place on a truly 24-hour basis, these patterns do reflect the flexibility of self-study.

Interestingly, hybrid learners appeared to use the Spanish Steps site for longer periods of time than the online learners, suggesting more sustained use. This can be seen in the average times for the shortest and longest sessions on the website reported by learners, with hybrid learners' shortest sessions averaging 28 minutes (compared to the online learners' 14 minutes) and with the hybrid learners' longest sessions averaging 97 minutes (compared to the online learners' 71 minutes). Of course these times may also reflect the relative lack of technological expertise and internet-literacy of the hybrid learners (i.e. there is no evidence that the hybrid learners spent longer learning - merely just spending longer using the site).

	Hybrid (n=22)	Online (n=18)
Every day	2	0
Every 2-3 days	4	5
Every week	9	8
Every other week	3	2
Once a month	1	3
Once or twice	1	0
Not used it	0	0

Table 3.3.5. How often have you used the Spanish Steps website since starting the course?

	Hybrid (n=22)	Online (n=18)
Early morning (6am-9am)	5	0
Late morning (9am-12noon)	6	5
Lunchtime (12noon-2pm)	11	5
Afternoon (2pm-5pm)	8	4
Early evening (5pm-7pm)	6	10
Late evening (7pm-10pm)	9	12
Late night (10pm-1am)	3	2
Twilight (1am-5am)	0	0

Table 3.3.6. What times of the day have you used the Spanish Steps website since starting the course?

It must be stressed that these are typical patterns of use and, in most cases, were not sustained throughout the duration of the evaluation. After ten weeks many of the hybrid learners' use of the site tailed off - with some attending the final sessions having not used the site for a month or so. Of course, Christmas was a major contributory factor in this tail-off, and the slippage of the courses from twelve weeks to four months was undoubtedly detrimental. That said, these patterns of use can also be linked to learners' motivation and discipline, with the most successful learners appearing to be those who managed to set a 'regime' of use:

[Learner A] I personally done about two or three sessions a week, one at night and then two at the local library in my lunchtime.

[Int] Right.

[Learner A] That's how I have planned it out.

[Int] Right. And have you kind of had a regime like going to the gym?

[Learner A] Yes, I have done like an hour. I have done like Tuesday, Thursday and one night. I have never done more than three sessions a week.

[Int] Right.

[Learner A] But all over Christmas I hadn't done it for about three weeks.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

Many learners, however, admitted finding problems with the lack of compulsion and self-imposed structure when trying to learn online:

[Learner A] Probably not as structured as I would've like to have done it but it has been like in my mind. So I thought well, I'll do half an hour on that and then probably if I have a spare half hour because I have got a computer where I work so I will do a little bit then. But I haven't really, I must say, done it in a structured way that I probably should have done.

[Int] It has always been like you think 'I really should have'.

[Learner A] But I made sure I done it all... no, I have done it all, yes.

[Learner B] One of the strengths of the course has also been one of its weaknesses. The strength I think is its ability to dip in and out when you feel like it [but] like most people I have not created a structured half hour. I have just done it when I have been able or when I felt like it. But having said that the course, if you are logged in as an individual, I think should follow your progress. What you have done and what you have got left to do.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

Finally, in terms of where learners were accessing the website from, this was predominantly reported to be the home, followed by the workplace - reflecting the relatively 'technologically-rich' background of most of the participants. Yet, as already mentioned, the BBC Learning Centre had attracted some individuals who did not have home access to a computer and relied on the open access in the learning centre (and in one instance also a local library) for using the website (see Table 3.3.7).

	Hybrid (n=22)	Online (n=18)
Your home	15	14
A relative's home	0	0
A friend's home	0	1
Your local learning centre/college	2	0
Your workplace	7	5
A library	1	1
A community centre/site	0	0
A private 'pay-per-use' site (e.g. internet café)	0	0
A BBC Learning Centre	6	0

Table 3.3.7. Where have you accessed the Spanish Steps website since starting the course?

For these learners the context of where the site was being used had a significant impact on their use of the site. Firstly, the technical difficulties of using the site (discussed in more detail in the following section) seemed to be exacerbated in these public sites where computers were not necessarily enabled to have sound (or had sound but no headphones), display videos via RealPlayer, handle state-of-the-art websites and where support staff were not familiar with the Spanish Steps site:

[Learner A] For me [the biggest problem] has got to be the RealPlayer. I mean, the library says that they don't have it because they have got the latest computers and they have stopped having it.

[Learner A] Even the library where I know they have got earphones but they don't use audio! Even when I said I need it for this course.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

"I had no knowledge whatsoever of computers when I started the course, but [the learning centre] has tutors on site for information. This was good, but having no-one on site that knew of the specific programme we were doing has made the course difficult for me."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Two]

The technical problems faced by learners in shared sites are discussed in more detail in section 3.4 of this report and were apparent in libraries, one of the learning centres and in workplaces - i.e. any context where the user is not able to configure their computer to their needs. Yet use of Spanish Steps website in a public site was also curtailed by non-technical factors, such as the limited time learners were able to use a computer (therefore limiting the flexibility of use) and the non-conducive environment to learning and practising speaking skills. As these two learners in the two open learning centres stated:

[Learner A] I must admit I haven't spoken [Spanish] out loud in the library. I had my headphones and I found it incredibly slow to download. That is another thing that really frustrated me. A waste of time and I had to dash back for work. You know I only had an hour and I waited about 20 minutes trying to get into it. To download each one is so frustrating.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

[Learner A] Some parts I do like but there's no real facility in there to speak, is there? If I'm going to come [to the learning centre] I can't really start spouting Spanish in a group full of people working. When there's no words it takes me a long time. I want to say it.

[Int] He says it. I think you're meant to repeat it.

[Learner A] What I'm saying is, the conditions in which you do it, unless you're doing it at home or on your own, it's very difficult.

[Site Three - Initial group interview]

All these factors seemed to leave some learners using Spanish Steps from public ICT sites feeling that they were missing out on the learning experience being afforded to their peers using home computers.

"I don't own a computer and only have access at the learning centre for only a few hours a week. Others will be able to learn far more on their home computers than we can."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Two]

3.4. Technical issues in learners' use of the Spanish Steps website

	Hybrid (n=22)		Online (n=18)	
	Occas	Several/ Every time	Occas	Several/ Every time
Couldn't connect to the internet	6	4	2	0
Couldn't connect to the Spanish Steps website	7	3	7	1
Computer/internet crashed when using the Spanish Steps website	4	3	2	1
Web pages took too long to download	10	8	8	6
Couldn't get sound to work	8	3	5	6
Couldn't get video clips to play	7	5	2	7
Couldn't find additional materials from CheshireNetwork site	0	2	-	-
Couldn't download/ print off additional materials from the CheshireNetwork site	1	2	-	-

Table 3.4.1. Did you encounter any technological problems in using the Spanish Steps website?

As can be seen from Table 3.4.1, the technical problems most commonly cited by the learners related to video, sound and length of time spent downloading material. There would appear to have been several reasons for this: learners not used to accessing multi-media websites did not have the 'plug-ins' required to play the video and audio components of the site, nor were they able to download them easily. In addition, as most of the learners accessed the site using a 56K modem, they were unprepared for the length of time they needed to stay on line to use the course. As we shall see from the interview data, the fact that people were reporting these problems in the questionnaires as occurring 'occasionally' does not mean that they only occurred infrequently - more likely that they gave up trying to use these features of the site.

"On a 50k modem [the website] is in places too slow. Demanding graphics such as the cash machine or the railway ticket machine just take too long to load."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Two]

The chief recurring technical problems involved getting the sound and video components of the site to work (critical components of any online language course). In particular the requirement of the RealPlayer software needed to view the video excerpts was found to be especially problematic:

"I have had major problems with RealPlayer on my computer and have wasted a lot of time deleting and reinstalling it to try and hear the sound files. When I have heard them they have

been most useful. These problems have prevented me from making as much progress as I'd hoped."

[Online Learner - UK]

"Unfortunately I have been unable to use video/sound on the PC I use to access the website. This has left me with many units incomplete and I was unable to complete the Challenge as the inability to complete video-sound parts of the course - I found this rather frustrating. I also found the units took a while to load up. As I am accessing it at work on lunch break time is of importance. I did not feel able to get as far forward as I would have liked."

[Online Learner - UK]

"The video and sound might work better with broadband. Waiting a long time for the sound to download was irritating - to the point of switching off with the numbers [section]. I often didn't bother with the sound on 'your turn' which was a pity."

[Online Learner - UK]

Moreover, when the video and sound elements were working some learners still found them unusable:

[Learner A] The videos, well, on mine you can hardly see.

[Learner B] Very small.

[Learner A] Very, very. The pictures break and everything.

[Learner C] It is very jolty when you start. But that may be our computers.

[Learner B] Well, yes. Well, that's what the BBC should be designing for. It is all very well for them that have state of the art high-speed computers and high-speed internet links but the ordinary user hasn't got that.

[...]

[Learner B] I thought perhaps they had designed it for broadband forgetting that Joe Bloggs is still on a 56k modem. But I am now broadband at home and it is no better.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

[Learner A] When you press on the speaking it takes a while to come through.

[Learner B] It takes forever.

[Int] Yes, but when it does, is the sound quality good on it?

[Learner B] Not at all.

[Int] No.

[Learner B] Very, very murky.

[Learner A] And fuzzy. You have to listen over and over and over again. That's when you press on the little microphone to hear.

[Learner B] That's right.

[Learner A] The ordinary sound is absolutely fine.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

It is worth noting that these problems were also experienced by learners using the course in their own time in the learning centre in Site Two - despite the state-of-the-art computers and technical support from learning centre support staff:

[Int] How did you find the video clips?

[Learner A] I couldn't get access on my computer, with great difficulty. A lot of them I didn't access so that was one thing I just couldn't.

[Learner B] No I couldn't sometimes because when you put the headphones on...

[Learner A] I had trouble with the audio as well.

[Learner B] Just the sound went off all together so you had to give up on that.

[Int] Was this from home or here?

[Learner B] From here [the learning centre]

[Int] From here as well, was it?

[Learner B] Because I haven't got a computer at home.

[Learner A] I found the RealPlayer a problem. I couldn't access it at home and I went to one library that had it and one that didn't so I had great difficulty a lot of the time. A lot of the time I didn't do the clips because I just couldn't access them.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

[Learner A] I couldn't get RealPlayer

[Learner B] I can't get it... I tried once before.

[Learner A] I couldn't get on it.

[Int] On the [learning centre] computers?

[Learner A] Yes.

[Learner B] I couldn't get it on here today.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner C] He showed me how to do it, how you can download it for free.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

For some of the learners these problems could be attributed to their relatively low levels of technical expertise and understanding. For example, in one of the observed sessions where the procedure to download and use RealPlayer was demonstrated by the tutor, some learners were unable to distinguish between the shareware and commercial versions - causing a great deal of anxiety. A significant number of the hybrid learners were not able to successfully install RealPlayer on their computers:

[Learner A] I'm not convinced by paying money to an American firm.

[Int] How do you mean?

[Learner A] Well, to get this Real thing [RealPlayer] I had it free for a bit but then I had to pay a fee to an American company. Once you have to give your credit card details and zip code it doesn't feel right.

[Learner B] Why were you paying for it? Mine was free.

[Others] Yes.

[Learner A] Well, I had to pay... I don't know why. It put me off using the Real... but you need to hear it to hear the sound. Maybe it's because I'm on AOL and have to pay per minute.

[Learner B] I don't think that makes a difference.

[Site Two - Initial Group Interview]

As well as the recurring sound and video complaints, other learners also experienced technical difficulties with the phrase book, logging on and tracking facilities on the website. For the most part, as these learners discuss, the elements of the site which learners were unable to use were quickly discarded and, as the final quotation explains, 'by the time we eliminated the bits we didn't like, what was left was good':

[Learner A] The other thing was the logging on. I had to abandon it altogether because you could get in and do the work but of course then you can't get the glue of the Challenge because you are not logged in.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] That was a real difficulty and that was an annoyance you know, having done all the Challenges then you couldn't get the clue because it just wouldn't take the logging in properly.

[Learner B] I have only just been shown how to use the Challenge because I thought the long, little bit at the bottom was the first clue and then the other bit was the next clue. I didn't realise there were several clues on there.

[Int] Right.

[Learner B] And I wondered why I couldn't get any further. Also, a lot of it is probably my lack of knowledge of computers or lack of knowledge of notice of signs or whatever. Even now I have done one section this morning but I have finished it and it says afterwards when I look at the thing again it says not attempted. Not attempted!

[...]

[Learner B] I also found it very difficult to get anything into the phrase book but I know how to do that now.

[Learner A] Yes the phrase book didn't work properly either.

[Learner B] No, it didn't work, no.

[Learner A] But by the time we eliminated the bits we didn't like, what was left was good.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

3.5 Learners' evaluation of the Spanish Steps website

	Hybrid (n=22)	Online (n=18)
I liked learning Spanish from the web	15	15
I liked being able to access the course from any PC, at any time	14	11
I liked the freedom to decide when to study	16	16
I found the amount of Spanish in each unit of Spanish Steps just right for me	9	11
I enjoyed being able to spend as much time as I wanted on any one activity	18	12
I had no problems understanding the language in each activity	6	12
I preferred to dip in and out of different units, rather than go from unit 1 to unit 6	5	3
I enjoyed being able to revisit units at leisure to refresh my understanding	6	12

Table 3.5.1. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

[Numbers citing 'strongly agree']

	Hybrid (n=22)	Online (n=18)
Snapshots	10	11
Video	11	8
Build your vocabulary activity	12	12
Your turn	12	11
Challenge	8	11
Cultural Fact files	2	5
Language notes	7	7

Table 3.5.2. How useful did you find the different parts of the Spanish Steps website?

[Numbers citing 'very useful']

These technical difficulties aside most, if not all, of the online and hybrid learners were impressed with the overall feel and presentation of the website. In this respect the website did fulfil a role as a motivating and engaging medium of learning:

"Although I have been through the whole course once and parts of it more than once I am still using it for revision and consolidation. I really like the video for the practice it gives in hearing Spanish in real situations. This combined with the consolidation that follows works well. And I like Kevin! Using the net is much more interesting than using tapes, CDs or books - also more flexible."

[Online Learner - UK]

[Learner A] Yes, I mean, I have spoken a fair bit of Spanish before but I still found the website, I have to say, right from the outset it is very professional... The way that the course interacts and the way that the units link into each other and the progress through the units, I think that is very good indeed.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

"I find [the website] very useful. I can go at my own rate and can check and recheck to make sure I have got the sounds right and being able to print copies for my own use. It's just a matter of 'if at first you don't succeed ... try again!'"

[Hybrid Learner, Site Two]

"Overall I think that it is clear, fresh and well presented. This is definitely a hint of web education future, where it is much more user friendly, fun and actually works in navigation and content."

[Online Learner - UK]

"I liked the course very much. It was funny and interesting. The situations were well chosen. The vocabulary and strategies taught will be really helpful for those going to Spain or other Spanish-speaking countries... I think Spanish Steps and the other Steps courses are better than other courses offered by the BBC, such as the Talk courses, because it is self-contained. I don't need to watch a video on TV or to listen to a radio programme. It is good because I can never remember to watch or listen to anything."

[Online Learner - Brazil]

That said, there was a sense amongst some of the more experienced Spanish learners on the hybrid courses that they wanted some more 'traditional' language learning features to the website - in particular more emphasis on formal grammar and the 'rules' of Spanish language. Again, this in part reflects the level of the hybrid learners' prior experience of Spanish and the fact that some were taking the hybrid course as a substitute for a weekly classroom course. It may also relate to the age profile of the learners, reflecting changes in language teaching methodology over recent years (moving from what Milton, in *Literature Review in Languages* 2002) calls 'a grammar translation model' to a 'communicative task-based problem-solving approach':

[Learner A] Yes, because there is no real emphasis on the grammar and some of the translations are anything but literal. You get the meaning but to try and translate word for word it is nothing like as good.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] You know, I mean I would like to see on there the meaning and then underneath literally a word-for-word translation.

[Learner B] I think there is something, you mentioned it earlier, that when you pressed the microphone on the sound it actually comes through much too quick to start with. It would be an idea if when it did come through it came through in possibly three stages... like... for me who is slow.

[Learner A] Yes.

[Learner C] Learning a language is completely different from when you are a child. As a child you watch and you listen and you absorb it without understanding any grammar or any of the structure of the language. By regular practice and keep doing that you can learn a language but as an adult you can't do that and I must... have the structure and the rules and regulations of the language in hand before you start something like this.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner C] To understand the verb 'tener', and have that conjugated or whatever it is you do with verbs. Before you go into something that says 'my house has a bedroom'. That bit 'tener' you are not going to understand what that is. Ok, you will listen to it and you will copy it but you won't understand it unless somebody has explained the grammar structure to you. That is why I say I don't think [Spanish Steps] is a beginner's course... you have got to have some underlying knowledge.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

[Learner A] Well, I will be going to Spain again this year now I am going to go back to my Spanish [classes] because I miss doing the whole exercise and doing the grammar... I need... you know, I like to learn the verbs, which I did last year. I need to do that.

[...]

[Learner A] I know that [this is] for a beginner but it wasn't enough for me, just the words. I like to learn why and why you use this word and all that.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

"Miss a bit more spelling, 'writing' exercises, i.e. ask people to create their own dictionary."

[Hybrid Learner, Site One]

The fact that some of the hybrid learners were non-beginners was reflected in their evaluation of the difficulty levels of the website - with no learners reporting that they found the course too difficult for them.

	Hybrid (n=22)	Online (n=18)
Just right for me	15	12
A bit too easy for me	6	6
A bit too difficult for me	-	-

Table 3.5.3. Do you think the Spanish Steps website was set at the appropriate level for you as a language learner?

If there were any comments about the difficulty of the website, these were in terms of the course being too easy. There were, for example, a few complaints that the Challenge sections of each stage as well as some of the exercises were overly simplistic - sometimes to the point of patronising the learners - and that some of the more experienced learners would welcome more rigorous assessment of their learning:

[Learner A] I have got criticisms on that. Things like when you have gone through your video clips and you have put your sentences together in the right order and the next bit is, what do they call it? 'Get to know your vocabulary' or something. A word comes up and you click on it and you hear it and then you get 3 options up - which one is the right one. I think they insult our intelligence. One I mentioned early today, ah... tuna, well, the answer is tuna. But the whole exercise is about things in a restaurant. One of the answers was tuna, the other two were absolutely stupid. You would never have got them in a restaurant anyway.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] So therefore you didn't actually have to learn anything at all to answer the question.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] Now, I feel it would be far more sensible if, for my education, in those three options you actually had to think. And there was a bit of a challenge there and you had to work something out or you had to remember. I think in most of those exercises it was just plain obvious which it was. So you were learning nothing. I think very definitely those need to be thought about a bit more to challenge you.

[Int] It could be that you are just quite good at it. I mean, was that the same for the rest of you?

[Learner B] No, it did have that. It did have lots of ones which you just knew weren't right. If you were on a certain topic you had a good chance of guessing what it was. If it was... like in a restaurant or directions you would be able to have a good guess.

[Int] But you're not just doing it to get through the test are you?

[Learner A] No.

[Int] You are learning it. The test is just there to...

[Learner C] Help you along.

[Learner A] I think it could help us a lot more... by actually challenging us.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

3.6 Use and evaluation of the Spanish Steps classroom sessions

As mentioned in the methods section, learners' attendance at some of the classroom sessions was poor. At one extreme, the majority of the learners at one centre failed to attend any of the scheduled sessions, resulting in a final turnout for the third classroom session of one learner who had completed the website and one learner who had dropped out but wanted to provide feedback for the evaluation. A similar situation occurred in another site. Even where learner numbers were sustained, at least three of the centres experienced difficulty arranging sessions which the learners all felt able to attend - leading to the significant slippage in time of all but one of the courses. In this respect the classroom sessions were the least successful aspect of the prototype project.

At the outset, the learners were enthusiastic about the idea of attending sessions to sustain their motivation, seeing it as an important and valuable part of their learning experience:

[Learner A] It's like ... you're going to be committed to it, you won't have time to do anything else because it's a set time. You're more committed and you get to know each other better as well. It's going to give us more of an incentive to stick with it.

[Learner B] It's like an awareness group, you know? You don't go there every week, you've got others that you can contact and you've got somebody you can contact if you do have questions and particularly if you are lazy.

[Learner C] See how we get on in two to three weeks or something like that or a month.

[Site One - Initial Group Interview]

Yet the fact that substantial numbers of learners did not attend the following sessions (especially in this particular centre) suggests that these good intentions were not sustained:

[Learner A] We're going to be asking a lot of questions to each other. You're in contact by email but then if you get together there are going to be a lot of questions you can't ask over the phone.

[Learner B] It's got the social effect. The fact that there are other people doing it who you can contact. I'm not on my own then, it's got the fact that there are other people out there, there is somebody you can contact and, yes, on another course you may have an email tutor there as well but having someone on the other end who knows how to pronounce is a good system.

[Site One - Initial Group Interview]

"The main reason the course failed was not the course itself, but the people. After the first meeting the attitude towards it was laughable. If someone can't spend 2 hours a week learning something then what's the point? I think because it was free that was the reason a lot of people lost interest. So in short, I feel there must be more interaction with each other and the tutor. Other than that at each meeting it would help to have a little 'homework' or other tasks. If people have to pay for the course then they might think twice about starting or giving up."

[Hybrid Learner, Site One]

From this respect some of the non-attendees concluded in retrospect that only weekly courses would create an obligation to attend (perhaps either reflecting the fact that some had been recruited onto Spanish Steps as an alternative to weekly classes or, in other cases, offering a means of externally attributing blame):

[Learner A] I think more classes will always be better but there will be a lot of people who can't always make it. I mean I think the best way would be to have [Spanish Steps] running along perhaps a weekly lesson like you do but it is the commitment people have got really isn't it?

[Site Four - Final Interview]

Just right for me	13
A bit too easy for me	2
A bit too difficult for me	0

Table 3.6.1. Do you think the Spanish Steps classroom sessions were set at the appropriate level for you as a language learner? (Hybrid learners, n=22)

	Very	Fairly	Not sure	Not at all
Attending the Spanish Steps classroom sessions	16	0	1	1

Table 3.6.2. How helpful have the following ways of learning and practising your Spanish been since starting the course? (Hybrid learners, n=22)

Those learners who did attend the classroom sessions found them to be, on the whole, useful and motivating. The questionnaire data suggest that learners found the sessions to be delivered at an appropriate level and all but two agreed that they were a 'very helpful' element of their learning. Indeed, those who did attend the sessions found them to be a motivating aspect of the course - allowing them to pace their learning and acting as a prompt to those who were maybe losing momentum:

[Learner A] We knew we had to finish by this session so you have got goals. You know I need that 'I've got to do this by so and so'."

[Learner B] Yes, I think it is a good idea though, isn't it, to have a goal?

[Learner A] You need it.

[Learner B] Yes. Knowing that you are going to come to a meeting.

[Learner A] We knew by the first sessions that we had to do too, didn't we?

[Site Two - Final Interview]

"Hopefully this meeting (where only 4 out of 11 have arrived...) will get me a bit more committed."

[Hybrid Learner, Site One]

However, although the learners seemed to welcome the chance to interact with the tutor and other learners, there was little evidence that the learners interacted and learnt from each other to a great extent. The sessions were too few to be able to say with confidence that 'learning communities' were being created. At best they allowed learners to demonstrate and reinforce their learning as well as correcting any confusion that had occurred between the classroom sessions:

"The classroom sessions were good and improved confidence in speaking in front of other people."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Two]

[Learner A] I think you need these sessions.

[Learner B] Oh, you do.

[Learner C] We need these sessions. Yes. Definitely.

[Learner A] Because you don't feel like you are on your own, do you? It is nice to meet up again and discuss.

[Learner B] Yes, because you can all join in again then.

[Learner A] Exactly it is a friendship part isn't it?

[Site Two - Final Interview]

[Learner A] Very good they are. Very good.

[Learner B] And what's more about the sessions is that it does increase your confidence of saying it in front of other people.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner B] When we first came here, somebody I can't remember ... they were really shy about saying anything and by the end of the session they were, 'Please Miss can I have a go?'

[Learner C] I mean, to me, the sessions are invaluable because however good an internet website course is, it is never going to be a replacement for a fluent Spanish teacher who has the ability to teach well. Because today for example I have just cleared up confusion I had between two Spanish words. Ok, I could have done that via email or via telephone with the tutor but it is so much better when you do it here and you can have the communication face-to-face. So now that confusion has now been cleared up for me [...] But it is also nice to hear everybody else's comment and questions because you are pulling something out from everybody else as well. Interaction between people is part of the learning process.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

Although numbers in all but one of the centres were lower than initially expected, tutors were generally positive about the classroom sessions, feeling that the learners were benefiting from the classroom situation and were generally keen to learn. Any specific criticism about the classroom sessions varied from tutor to tutor. For one, for example, the classroom sessions were overly occupied in 'trouble-shooting' technical problems with the learners - especially in the first session (which some students had also criticised as focusing too much on administration and technical issues):

"I personally think that, to start with, we need a kind of 'filter' in the form of some 'requirements' that people need to be able to do this kind of course. It's not good if we waste a great deal of time explaining how the email and the internet works or (later on) solving all type of technical problems... It ends up looking more a computer course than a languages course."

[Tutor Site One - end of course feedback]

Two of the tutors also indicated that teaching a class with a diverse range of language levels, from fairly fluent speakers to absolute beginners, was a challenge in terms of successfully differentiating their teaching:

“I think it went quite well. Ah, in fact some of the students - I am thinking more of those students that have never done any Spanish before - made a very good improvement because the rest of them had done a class so had some Spanish before so they found it a bit easier. But it was real beginners that were challenged there because they were left on their own.”

[Tutor Site Two - end of course interview]

3.7 Others forms of learning

	Very	Fairly	Not sure	Not at all
Using the Spanish Steps website	12	9	1	0
Using the additional Spanish Steps material on the Network site	1	1	4	4
Using other Spanish websites on the internet	1	2	4	4
Attending other Spanish classes that you may had been taking whilst on the Spanish Steps course	3	4	1	2
Practising with family and friends	7	6	2	1

Table 3.7.1 How helpful have the following ways of learning and practising your Spanish been since starting the course? (Hybrid learners, n=22)

In terms of the whole Spanish Steps package, the hybrid learners were keen to use the website and, in lesser numbers, keen to use the classroom sessions. One of the notable aspects of the course was the very limited use made of the tutor outside of the sessions. Whilst the tutors in all four of the sites were diligent in contacting learners by email and telephone to prompt learning or to rearrange dates for classroom sessions, there was little reciprocal attempt made by learners to contact the tutor for support or practice.

Every week	2
Every other week	0
Once a month	4
Once or twice during the course	8
Never	0

Table 3.7.2 How many times did you send emails to and/or receive emails from your tutor? (Hybrid learners, n=22)

Every week	0
Every other week	0
Once a month	0
Once or twice during the course	10
Never	6

Table 3.7.3. How many times did you have telephone conversations with your tutor? (Hybrid learners, n=22)

At the beginning of the course, two of the learners' greatest concerns were that of needing technical support and linguistic support (especially in terms of pronunciation). From this perspective these fears were allayed by the offer of telephone and email contact with the tutors, although some learners felt that the telephone was too intrusive and therefore preferred the option of emailing:

[Int] What are you going to do if you get problems with IT?

[Learner A] We'll phone [the tutor].

[Learner B] She said we could phone her any time, day or night. We'll be ringing her up... 'how do you use Real[Player]?'

All laugh

[Learner A] She's going to be happy!

[Learner B] I'll email her first, to be considerate.

[Both] Yes, we'll use the email... it'll be easier for her.

[Learner A] She can ring us if we need help with pronunciation.

[Site Two - Initial Group Interview]

[Int] So if you have any problems using the website or downloading the RealPlayer, what are you going to do?

[Learner A] Call [the tutor]!

Laughs

[Site One - Initial Group Interview]

[Int] What is the tutor going to be particularly useful for?

[Learner A] Pronunciation. I mean, you can put sentences together, you don't know if you were doing it right or wrong. So a bit of guidance there.

[Site One - Initial Group Interview]

Yet, as the questionnaire data and tutor interviews confirm, in practice there was very little contact between learners and tutor. For some, the initial discomfort over telephoning the tutor was off-putting, with learners not wanted to 'be a nuisance' or 'bother' the tutor:

[Learner A] I don't know. People haven't contacted her because they don't want to be a nuisance, I suppose, or they just don't want to.

[Learner B] But you have got to find out if you are doing it right, don't you?

[Learner A] Yes. I don't know why.

[Learner B] I have done it twice. It was alright.

[Learner A] I rang her about the RealPlayer and told her about that but that was all really.

[Learner C] I think if [the course] went on and it got harder then yes, she would probably get more.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

[Learner A] Well she said if she hadn't heard from us in two weeks she was going to email us, didn't she? I can't see why we would need to because the answers are all there on the website.

[...]

[Learner A] She said she might ask us some questions to see how we are getting on, so it will be that sort of meeting, Spanish.

[Learner B] I wouldn't mind her ringing me up but I find little to see why I'd ring her unless I'd got to a dead stop and couldn't get anywhere which would be a technical thing rather than language.

[...]

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

For other learners who were less adept with email there was little chance of the tutor contacting them via email and/or receiving a reply:

[Learner A] He didn't email me but that was my own fault because I didn't give him my email. Because I didn't want to give him my work one and I forgot my home one as it is under my girlfriend's.

[Learner B] I think I did give him my email but I gave him the wrong one.

[Int] So he has been emailing some poor soul somewhere else.

[Learner B] Well, I just don't think it would have been a lot.

[Learner A] But he has been emailing people quite often.

[Learner C] Yes. Oh yes.

[Learner A] It was my own fault.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner C] Quite a few.

[Learner A] I never got in touch with him to give it.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

This lack of willingness to communicate via email and the difficulty sometimes involved in contacting learners by telephone was also confirmed in the evaluation team's attempts to send interim questionnaires via email and arrange telephone interviews. Yet whilst some learners did not feel comfortable with these methods of contact, other groups of more linguistically adept students simply did not feel the need to contact the tutor as all the language help they needed was contained in the website:

[Int] Not many have emailed or phoned the tutor.

[Learner A] We didn't find that necessary with the language. The only thing, the main area of difficulty, was with the technology bit. I mean the language was self-explanatory. It was all there you know. If you have got a dictionary then it wasn't a problem.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] It was purely and simply the technology where we had the problems.

[Learner B] I think that is right.

[Int] So you would ring [the tutor] up just to ask her how to do this and how to do that?

[Learner C] No, she didn't know.

[Learner A] [The tutor] is not a technical person, she is a language person.

[Int] Right.

[Learner A] So [the tutor] was fine if you wanted to know a word but I didn't really find that a difficulty but she probably doesn't know much more about computers than I do.

[Int] But isn't it a great idea to have a live tutor on the end of the phone if you want pronunciation if you were worried that you were saying it wrong?

[Learner A] Well, it was on the system. They were speaking it on the system. On the system the translations are on the system. It was not necessary. The only things that were necessary were "How the bloody hell do I log in!"

[Learner B] I think [Learner A] is absolutely right to some extent. It is a compliment to the course that a tutor isn't necessary at this level or doesn't seem to be necessary at this level. Nevertheless, I ticked the box that said I welcomed the opportunity of a tutor and I agreed strongly. Because of the opportunity of knowing one is there.

[Learner A] Yes, great.

[Learner B] It's very, very valuable. The necessity of it in the end didn't turn out to be so strong but I am sure that if you went onto Spanish Steps 2, or a course in more depth then that is where a tutor would really come into it.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

"They didn't 'use' me a lot but they knew they could, and that back up relaxed them a bit, at least they knew they wouldn't get stuck if they didn't want to."

[Tutor Site One - end of course feedback]

Moreover, when learners did contact the tutor via telephone there was often a reluctance to communicate in Spanish:

"I did email them regularly. Oh well, I had a few gaps but it was once every two weeks or twice every two weeks. There were times when I did not get many replies from them or I didn't get any enquiries about 'how do you say that in Spanish?' or 'I don't understand what he is talking about here?' which was a bit disappointing, [but] there were lots of queries about 'my RealPlayer is not working'... Well, I had just insisted that you could ring me. I mean, at the beginning I got some phone calls on a Saturday morning ... to tell me the RealPlayer wasn't working and I kept trying to talk to them in Spanish but they weren't very keen on this as they wanted to know how the RealPlayer worked."

[Tutor Site Two - end of course interview]

Although expressing a willingness to communicate with each other during the span of the course there was little if any communication and self-help amongst the learners between the sessions, although they obviously benefited from talking to each other during the classroom sessions. As with other aspects of the course it seemed that the hybrid learners had good intentions, which quickly did not materialise - as the following quotations from one of the initial interviews and then one of the interim questionnaires demonstrates:

[Int] How are you going to practise in between sessions?

[Learner A] Well, we're going down the pub.

[Int] Is that learning?

[Learner A] Yes, we've all just arranged to meet up in the pub and practise!

[Learner B] Well, I'll have to have tapas because I'm on my own.

[Learner C] *You* can come.

[Learner D] Yes, we'll be round your house.

[Learner A] What's Spanish for violin?

[Site Two - Initial Group Interview]

"Communication between the learners is close to non-existent."

[Hybrid Learner, Site One]

	Agree Strongly	Agree Slightly	Don't Know	Disagree Slightly	Disagree Strongly
I used the additional activities on the Network site	1	2	3	1	6
I found the Network activities really useful	1	1	3	1	6

Table 3.7.4. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Spanish Steps course? (Hybrid learners, n=22)

Also notable were the very low levels of use of the CheshireNetwork materials produced for the hybrid learners. Tutors in some of the centres used the materials during the classroom sessions with great success and felt that they were very useful in the classroom situation.

"Network exercises were very well accepted [in the classroom sessions]. I think they are brilliant and students found them particularly useful because they are directly related to the Spanish Steps website."

[Tutor Site One - end of course feedback]

Technically, the reliance of the Network site on the Adobe Acrobat software package caused the same problems for learners as the use of RealPlayer. Students in public sites were often unable to download Adobe Acrobat onto shared computers to access and at home are not used to doing so and therefore had trouble. For example, in one of the informally observed teaching sessions, having had the site demonstrated to them, learners in a learning centre were then unable to download PDF documents on the computers in the centre.

[Learner A] Well, we put this Network in and it wants Adobe Acrobat or something and so you tell it to do that and it goes onto Adobe Acrobat and starts downloading and that's it... you've lost it.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

Other learners were simply not impressed with what they saw as an unofficial 'add-on' to the Spanish Steps course for which they did not have time:

"Network site didn't tell you anything at all."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Two]

[Int] Did you have a look at the Network material?

[Learner A] Never got that.

[Int] No. Why not?

[Learner A] Time I think, because I was concentrating on the Spanish Steps and I never actually got as far as investigating this Network.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] I mean [the tutor] reminded us in one of the emails.

[Learner B] Yes.

[Learner A] He reminded us that it was there and I have to say that I completely forgot about it all over again.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] Because it was Spanish Steps and I almost felt... well, if the Network is part of this then it should be part of it... And it should be part of Spanish Steps, not something completely separate. So no I never did go and investigate.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

[Int] Did any of you try the Network material?

[Learner A] No, we didn't try that. No.

[Learner B] No.

[Learner C] I did try to get into that once.

[Learner A] What was that? What was it?

[Int] It was material that you could download, handouts.

[Learner A] Didn't have the time really. I didn't find I had the time.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

This non-use of tutor and Network materials as well as the low attendance of the sessions should be understood in terms of how these learners were using the Spanish Steps course. Most of the hybrid learners were using self-learning materials such as textbooks, tapes alongside the website. Moreover, for some of the online and hybrid learners the Spanish Steps course was being used as an adjunct to other 'traditional' classroom courses. In this respect Spanish Steps was an ideal but not wholly compelling back-up:

"At present I am attending evening classes at my local college to learn beginners Spanish and find the Spanish Steps web pages very, very useful, especially as the syllabuses in both courses run almost parallel with each other."

[Online Learner - England]

"I found the site very useful as a sideline to the classes I am attending. I'm not sure how I would have fared had I been learning through the site exclusively! It may have left me with unanswered questions."

[Online Learner - England]

[Learner A] I mean for us two, we actually attend other Spanish beginner classes.

[Int] Oh, right.

[Learner A] But this has been the ideal back-up.

[Int] Right.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

[Learner A] Finished the site and also used it as a refresher top-up to the other weekly class because in that classroom situation they move on and on and on whether you have got it or not.

[Learner B] That's right, they have gone on.

[Learner A] Whereas with this you can actually come back and have your own private teacher for a short time. And actually try to catch up with what you didn't really cotton on to in the classroom. I think it is certainly an excellent top-up for a weekly class.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner B] It's a back-up isn't it?

[Learner A] It is our secret back-up.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

Other learners were using Spanish Steps as a means of consolidating knowledge from previous attempts to learn Spanish and/or 'treading water' between classroom courses:

[Learner A] I have not done anything to back up this time. I did intend to go back doing Spanish, which I will probably start this term my normal Spanish class but I have just kept this but um... I feel I need something else to back this up. I don't feel this is enough for me.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

[Learner A] I'm studying it just to keep it ticking over so I don't forget the words. But I haven't done as much of that. I have concentrated on this Spanish Steps while I have been doing it but haven't really been doing any other courses other than just plain tapes I have already learnt things from.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

[Learner A] I found the whole course useful and it certainly helped me to consolidate what I already knew... pronunciation etc.

[Site Two - Final Interview]

3.8 Learner dropout

In terms of learner outcomes it is also worthwhile considering the substantial numbers of online and hybrid learners who apparently dropped out of the course. For many of the online and hybrid learners, the lack of obligation and commitment involved in the course meant that Spanish Steps was a lower priority in their lives than other more pressing issues. People did not attend the classroom sessions and did not complete the six stages of the website for a range of reasons. At one extreme some of the hybrid learners suffered serious personal and family bereavements and illnesses which left Spanish Steps as a low priority:

[Learner A] Can I just say at this point, um, I was enthusiastic when I first started.

[Int] Um.

[Learner A] And it was brilliant. And I found it extremely useful and it is the only way for me to learn. Unfortunately I have had three deaths in the family. One was my mother and I have been away for a couple of weeks in Lincolnshire.

[Int] Um.

[Learner A] My daughters-in-law's father's funeral, so it has been horrific and I have been diagnosed with something very nasty. So I have not been doing anything at all. In the last 4 to 5 weeks. But I wanted to come and support the group and you know I would like to get back after Christmas and start all over again because due to the circumstances over the last 8 weeks it has been pretty bad.

[Int] But it was worth coming back to...

[Learner A] But it is worth coming back and as far as I am concerned when you get to my age, it really is the only way for me to learn because I just keep going back and going back. If I forget it I just go back and switch the computer on. I think it is a really good thing.

[Learner B] I started off well and then sort of dropped down. I mean I came tonight as well for support and just to see the class and I will carry on. Because I haven't actually completed the course but I feel it is a course that you can complete at your own speed.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner B] Should that be 6 months or 3 months... whatever.

[Learner A] Will it be left on though?

[Int] Oh yes.

[Learner A] I mean that is the beauty of it, isn't it?

[Site Four - Final Interview]

Some other hybrid learners started the course with long holidays to Spain and Florida planned for December (hence their original attraction to a course which finished before Christmas). Other learners experienced lifestyle changes, which meant that Spanish Steps was no longer convenient. These reasons ranged from having to spend extra time in work, changing work routines, which meant that to access the website from work was no longer possible, to having concurrent Spanish classes cancelled, leading to a drop in motivation:

[Learner A] I was doing it at work. So it was on my break at dinnertime but I have stopped doing that because, now I am in the office, everyone keeps coming in and out so I can't actually do it.

[Learner B] No. No.

[Learner A] So I would rather leave work altogether and go out.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] So it started off quite well because I got a bit higher now. I can't sit because I just don't have the time.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] I have been doing it at home more than anything now but my computer is not as good at home as it is at work. It is a lot slower and time consuming and just getting downloads and stuff like that.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

"My college course was cancelled in November 2002 and I have struggled to keep up a regular learning routine."

[Online Learner - England]

"I can't speak for anyone else who didn't turn up [to the classroom sessions] but am a little disappointed in myself for the little effort I have given the course so far. I am finding it difficult to delegate quality time to learning online, although I am still very interested in learning Spanish, and will do so in the future. My level of discipline is lower than I hoped, especially as I work on PCs 12 hours a day, 7 days a week at the moment. This is mainly why I can't warrant the little recreational time I have studying online. I feel, for me, that I need a more structured 'physical' course that I attend on a regular basis or, even better, a personal tutor."

[Site One dropout - no attendance at three sessions - email communication]

As an online learner who got married during the evaluation understandably argued:

"It's easy to make the course a low priority when you are busy and I haven't looked at it for some time."

[Online Learner -England]

However, there were signs that some learners had signed up for the Spanish Steps courses without knowing the nature of the course. The use of the internet and online learning was obviously a deterrent to some - as was the use of the computers during some of the classroom sessions:

[Learner A] One of the women who was at that very first meeting ... I think you could sense she wasn't going to go with it. She was very, very new to computers. Very, very new to the internet. She actually openly said "I am not going to do anything that means I have got to stay on the internet. I am quite happy to go on download something and disconnect."

[Int] Right.

[Learner B] But I am not going to stay on the internet.

[Int] That is a bit of a drawback with this course.

[Learner B] That lady, yes. That lady, yes.

[Learner C] Yes, I think so very much.

[Learner B] Right from the beginning.

[Learner C] Yes. She was doomed to failure.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

"I could see in the first meeting that she wasn't going to last. She had just got on the internet literally a week or two before the first meeting and as I was explaining and giving a bit of a demonstration on how it works, she said: 'Well, does that mean that I have to stay online while I do this?' And I said: 'Well I suppose you have to really,' and she was saying that she felt it was too expensive. She was just really concerned. She was like 'I am not paying' and she got sort of quiet and very negative about it and she said 'I am not paying for all this stuff...' The internet it is expensive and it just seemed like somebody who has never really used the net before. She was just overly worried about that and I could see that she wasn't really going to use it."

[Tutor Site Four - end of course interview]

[Learner A] Yes, because when you come in here you start to think about practicalities, don't you? I don't want to spend an hour or two of my time on the computer [at the classes]... I thought we'd get more personal interaction. I wouldn't have signed up for a course purely for the internet.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

Given the slightly rushed nature of some of the centres' enrolment of learners it is clear, as this learner suggests, that some learners felt that being given a clearer indication of what the course entailed before embarking on the course would have helped learner retention:

"My suggestion is to either have a very clear pre-selection of participants or have meetings with the tutor every two weeks. That would definitely help the 'communication' aspect of the course."

[Hybrid Learner, Site One]

From this perspective, it was telling that the most successful centre in terms of retaining attendance at the classroom sessions had held a Spanish Steps 'taster' session in the summer before enrolling the final twelve learners.

"I think a few of them had done GCSE Spanish so obviously they knew it. Then the ones who were real beginners, they knew a bit [of Spanish] as well because during the summer we had a taster course to advertise the project and to recruit the students. So in the taster course we did, we gave them some Spanish and the Spanish teacher decided to do the alphabet because it was like the recruitment session where we had about 40 or 50 people... and then from those 50 we recruited 12. We advertised it on the radio and people came along. We showed them the BBC Spanish Steps programme and then we taught them a bit of Spanish. We told them if they were interested in joining the project. Then they got letters and most of them replied to them and I think it was the first ones who replied to the letter."

[Tutor Site Two - end of course interview]

Nevertheless, there was a sense of a lack of commitment and obligation towards the course among some of the learners, given the lack of financial commitment involved, the lack of weekly sessions and end qualification. From this perspective Spanish Steps was something which was easily entered into and easily dropped:

[Learner A] Being realistic and not cynical, these are great things and you are not committing a lot of money. If it's rewarding I'll continue doing it, if it's not then I'm likely to drop it. I don't mind [the tutor] ringing me up, that would be a good thing to keep me going but I can see it fading away...

[Learner B] You need to be motivated.

[Learner A] I will try. I have the intention to come here and try but I fear that I'm just saying that ... I've got commitments.

[Site Three - Initial Group Interview]

"In our case many students just enrolled in this course as an alternative because they couldn't get into any other 'normal' evening classes and although this course wasn't exactly what they were looking for, they stuck to it until they could find something else... that may have been because this course was offered for free with many people relating 'quantity of commitment' to 'quantity of money'."

[Tutor Site One - end of course feedback]

This sentiment was also apparent in the first meeting, as this learner who was soon to drop out of the course explained:

[Learner A] I'm really worried with all that I've heard.

[Int] Worried about what?

[Learner A] I'm really worried that I won't have time for it all. I've got these training courses for work. I'm working... I don't know if I can fit it all in... I liked the idea that I could drop it when I wanted... that you're not forced to do it all.

[Site Two - Initial Group Interview]

As with other internet-based learning, some of the learners therefore suggested that only with the weekly obligation of attending classes would they realistically maintain their attendance and learning:

[Learner A] No, really. I mean I would have liked to have come to that class anyway. I was just being a bit lazy. I should have just kept it up. I do think classes are good. If I had come to the second class I would have kept it up more then.

[Int] Yes.

[Learner A] I think the internet alone is not enough to keep you going. Whereas the classes, where people are in the same boat it's a good way.

[Learner B] That's right. You realise you are not the only one, don't you.

[Learner C] That's right. Absolutely.

[Site Four - Final Interview]

"I originally felt that 3 live sessions plus computer/distance learning would provide flexibility. In hindsight, I would have preferred the discipline of more regular attendance at the tutor sessions."

[Hybrid Learner Site Three - end of course feedback]

"Experience [of the website] very limited as lots of things are happening in my life [and I'm] not getting around to it. Attending a weekly course would put a bit more pressure on!!"

[Hybrid Learner, Site One]

"Because there is obviously no commitment to attend a specific lesson each week the learning is put on the backburner. Learning Spanish became very low on a list of more pressing priorities."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Three, end of course feedback]

3.9 Learning outcomes

	Hybrid (n=22)		Online (n=18)	
	Very Good	Fairly Good	Very Good	Fairly Good
Understanding Spanish words/phrases when you hear them	4	13	8	7
Understanding Spanish words/phrases when you see them written down	10	7	7	9
Pronouncing Spanish words correctly	7	9	6	10
Speaking: saying Spanish words/phrases when prompted	5	13	7	8
Writing Spanish words/phrases	4	11	4	11
Remembering Spanish words/phrases	3	14	3	14

Table. 3.9.1. How much progress do you feel that you made since starting the course?

	Very	Fairly	Not Sure	Not at all
Take part in a simple 'first' meeting' conversation, using appropriate greetings	6	9	0	1
Say a few words/sentences about your occupation	3	8	2	2
Fill in a form with some personal details	2	11	1	1
Buy a drink and a snack in a bar	7	8	1	1
Read a restaurant menu	6	7	2	1
Order a meal in a restaurant	4	10	1	1
Buy food in a shop or market	3	9	2	1
Understand prices	4	8	2	1
Seek directions in the street	3	10	2	1
Understand directions given	3	7	2	1
Say a few words/sentences about the place where you live	3	10	1	1
Say a few words/sentences about how you spend your free time	1	8	1	4
Say a few words/sentences about your daily routine	1	6	4	4
Read a short 'first contact' letter from a Spanish speaker	1	8	1	2
Ask for information in a tourist office	1	7	5	2
Book a hotel room	2	11	1	2
Send an email to book a hotel room	3	6	4	3
Find out information and book ticket at railway station	10	3	1	2
Be able to understand and reply to simple questions	1	11	2	2
Take part in a conversation with a Spanish-speaker on a personal topic/topics of choice	3	6	3	3

Table. 3.9.2. How confident do you now feel about carrying out the following tasks in Spanish? Hybrid learners at final session (n=18)

For those hybrid learners who finished the three classroom sessions, learning outcomes reflected the content of this Entry level course, i.e. primarily at the level of learning words, short phrases and consolidating prior knowledge. The outcomes listed above in Tables 3.9.1 and 3.9.2 must be read bearing in mind that some learners were starting the course from a 'competent novice' rather than absolute beginner level. As can be seen in table 3.9.2, the hybrid learners who completed the three classroom sessions were more confident in simple greetings, saying a few words about themselves, reading a menu and buying railway tickets. As these learners explain:

[Learner A] Well, we can speak it a little bit more. Not much though.

[Learner B] I mean you can because you are well travelled.

[Learner A] Oh, I don't know about that but um... yes, I mean it does help you to remember.

[Learner C] It refreshes. I mean I did it last year on a course and it just... brings back the words, the words that you are familiar with. Obviously there are words that you are not familiar with. The exercises I was familiar with I breezed but I did find some of them difficult.

[Learner A] Yes, I did.

[Int] So it kind of refreshed your memory in terms of words.

[Learner B] Some things are quite easy, aren't they?

[Site Two - Final Interview]

"The course helped me to consolidate my existing knowledge of Spanish. Also learnt extra words and improved pronunciation."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Two]

	Hybrid (n=16)	Online (n=7)
<i>Use the Spanish that you have learnt?</i>		
Correspond with friends/relations in Spanish (letters, email etc.)	2	1
Visit/go on holiday to Spain/Spanish-speaking country	13	3
Live in Spain/Spanish speaking-country	0	1
<i>Carry on learning Spanish?</i>		
Carry on using the Spanish Steps website	14	5
Use other Spanish learning websites on the internet	5	2
Enrol on a 'classroom' Spanish course in a college	9	2
<i>Learn another language?</i>		
Use other BBCi language learning websites	4	1
Use other language learning websites on the internet	2	0
Enrol on a classroom language course in a college	1	0
<i>Learn something else?</i>		
Take part in an online learning course in another subject	1	1
Enrol on a course in a college in another subject	1	1

Table. 3.9.3. What are you going to do next in the next 6 months?

It is also worth considering the Spanish Steps course in terms of the future activities of the learners who completed the course. As can be seen from table 3.9.2, most of the learners who completed the final evaluation questionnaires intended to carry on using the Spanish Steps website. As such it constituted a valuable reference resource which could be used well beyond the final classroom session:

"The course was ideal for me. Going back to the website over and over was extremely useful. I look forward to going back to it."

[Hybrid Learner, Site Four]

This sentiment was also echoed by those learners who had not attended all the classroom sessions and not completed the website. These learners did not consider themselves as having dropped out of the course - merely that they were taking their own time to complete it (therefore adhering to the principle of flexible learning which had attracted them in the first place). A popular suggestion from those learners who had completed the course was for a complementary Spanish Steps Two course at intermediate and advanced levels:

"I would definitely think that there should be another course or courses leading on from this."

[Hybrid Learner, Site One]

From the wider adult learning perspective it is important to consider the extent to which courses "encourage progression towards further learning" (DfES 2002b, p.25). From our questionnaire data some online and hybrid learners intended to enrol on classroom Spanish courses. However, it is important to bear in mind that many had planned to do so (or were doing so) before they took part in Spanish Steps. Therefore there is no evidence that Spanish Steps had created a new desire in the learners to take subsequent courses. More that it was part of a much wider, already established 'learning journey'. This point is reinforced by the relatively low numbers who intended to learn other languages or other subjects. A similar point can be made about the numbers of learners who intended to go on holiday to Spain (or a Spanish-speaking country) - in many of the courses this was why people took the Spanish Steps course in the first place, rather than an outcome of following the Spanish Steps prototype course.

Section 4 : Learner vignettes

Despite the limited nature of the sample there were some learners who can provide glimpses of how the Spanish Steps model was able to attract learners from a varied background and perhaps extend participation in learning. (Names are fictitious to preserve anonymity.)

Elizabeth Smith is a retired housewife working for the Women's Royal Volunteer Service. She had never used a computer before recently attending the learning centre for beginners' computer sessions. After attending some of these sessions she found out about the Spanish Steps classes and decided to combine her computer learning with learning a language. These quotations from Elizabeth throughout the course illustrate her 'learning journey' via the Spanish Steps course:

Before

- "It is great because I wanted to learn right from the beginning even though I have never been to Spain. Never been abroad but I just wanted to learn."
- "It's something I've always wanted to do but have never had the time basically. When you've got children growing up and you've got to go out to work ... and having the grandchildren. But I don't have them as often as I used to so I've got more time to sit and study."

During

- "I have just got into it and I wanted to carry on and do a bit more and a bit more so I kept coming into the learning centre and doing little bits."
- "Now I have been going to the learning centre for 2 hours on Tuesdays, Thursdays and sometimes Saturdays."
- "We had a meeting today - everyone seemed to enjoy it and we had some fun trying to say the alphabet and taking part being receptionist and visitor - it was great. Looking forward to the next time - ¡Hasta luego!

After

- "I have enjoyed the Spanish Steps course with [the tutor]. Made some good friends at the meetings. I will continue to learn Spanish at home with my tape and phrase book. Also I will continue to go to the learning centre and log onto other Spanish programmes. Thank you for everything."

Dave Evans is a precision machinist from a rural town. He left school with some O-levels and had not participated in any post-compulsory or adult learning since. He saw an advertisement for the Spanish Steps sessions in a local paper and was attracted by its flexibility as he felt “unable to commit regular evenings” to courses. Although he was a novice computer user he was motivated in terms of taking holidays in Spain and supporting his daughter’s Spanish learning in school:

“Whenever I go to a different country, I can pick things up to a certain extent, things like asking for a drink or whatever. Can’t speak it fluently, if someone was asking me a question [in Spanish] I wouldn’t have a clue. I think you should try to learn the language to try and speak to them in their language. The course itself, well I was at work with regular meetings at night... My daughter’s learning Spanish at school - but my son has given it up so hopefully if I can do a little bit.”

“I’m not brilliant on computers. We’ve got one at home, the kids use it, I try and use it a little bit... I’m looking forward to completing it but one of my main worries is the internet, pressing the wrong button or something.”

Dave was one of four learners who attended the final session in Site Three and he had progressed further than any other in terms of the six Spanish Steps stages. He was the only learner who had made use of the tutor in terms of practising his Spanish and he had also learnt at home with the support of his daughter. On reflection, attending the Spanish Steps hybrid course had left him in a position to continue onto a further course:

“I found that the course gave me a basic knowledge of the language which I can use to further my need to learn a language without being tied in to a course where I had to attend regularly... On the whole I’ve enjoyed the course and would sign up for one again.”

Sarah Jones is an office administrator. She was attracted to the Spanish Steps course because it was a short course ('and I don't know where I'll be in January') and she could learn when she wanted on her computer at home. She had not participated in any learning since leaving school at fifteen and was looking for a complete life change by moving to Spain:

[Int] Have you ever done any learning or courses before?

[Sarah] I haven't, no. Because I came here and learnt English when I was twelve, I came to this country and I speak French also.

[Int] Where are you from originally?

[Sarah] Mauritius. I never took any exams and did any studies because when I came here all I had time to do was to learn English and then I went straight into work so I left school when I was fifteen.

[Int] So what was it about this course then?

[Sarah] Well, I go away to Spain often and I've enjoyed it there. Spain's not very far and its very multi-cultural.

[Int] But why now?

[Sarah] I'm getting old! It's the weather here really! No, I just want to move away. I want the warm climate.

[Int] Has anyone else... friends, family... encouraged you to learn to speak Spanish?

[Sarah] No, it's just for myself.

Section 5 : Discussion and concluding questions

This evaluation has obviously given more attention to problematic areas of the courses which merit further attention. As a whole it should be concluded that the 'e-language learning for adults' prototype was a qualified success. Aside from the technical problems experienced, those learners who followed the hybrid courses through to the third session were impressed with the Spanish Steps package and the classroom sessions offered alongside them.

It was also clear that the hybrid courses were attracting learners who, it is likely, would not be using the Spanish Steps website in a purely online capacity. When compared to the autonomous online learners, the hybrid learners were noticeably older, less well educated and with less extensive technological backgrounds. Whilst the hybrid courses could not be said to be widening participation to those learners who would not be taking part in any educational activity at all, they would appear to be widening participation in e-learning activities.

The hybrid learners who followed the course through to the final classroom session were also more successful than the autonomous learners in completing the six stages of the Spanish Steps website. This alone demonstrates the 'added value' of the classroom sessions. In short, the hybrid model of online learning with supporting classroom sessions has allowed a group of learners to learn online at levels above and beyond what could be expected otherwise.

Of course these conclusions must be considered in relation to the less successful elements of the prototype. We can learn a great deal from these about how learners approach hybrid learning courses such as the Spanish Steps prototype. In hindsight it may well be that many of the 'negative' findings from this evaluation are to be expected and should be expected in the future. One of the key conclusions to take away from the prototype activities is that the educational community needs to shift its expectations and assumptions about e-learning towards a more realistic basis. In particular five areas arise from the findings of the present evaluation:

i) Recognising how learners use e-learning and hybrid education

It is necessary to recognise that these learners were using the Spanish Steps courses like any other learning resource and were not making best use of the 'new' forms of learning offered in the blend (such as email-based communication between learners and tutors). As Cullen *et al.* (2002) quite sensibly conclude, "the evidence does not suggest the 'new learning technologies' imply or precipitate 'new forms of learning'". For this group, hybrid learning was perhaps less of a new, inherently motivating and engaging form of learning than another form of learning which learners added to their repertoire of learning sources. Spanish Steps seemed to play a supporting, rather than a guiding, role in individuals' learning.

For example, many of the learners were using Spanish Steps alongside a host of other informal and formal Spanish learning resources. Some learners were enrolled on concurrent Spanish courses in colleges, others were using textbooks, tapes and friends. For some learners Spanish Steps played a supporting role, for others a more central role. From both perspectives learners were adopting a 'bricolage' approach toward Spanish learning resources of which Spanish Steps was but one element.

For some learners the website could be seen as akin to a textbook which learners felt able to draw upon to consolidate prior learning. Although, in the long term, this gives Spanish Steps longevity as a learning tool, in the short term it would appear, crucially, that learners did not have the e-skills, self-discipline and the obligation or compulsion needed to complete the course. This led to learners not attending the classroom sessions, thus highlighting the inherent tension in the hybrid model, which was not successfully resolved for some of the Spanish Steps learners, i.e. the difficulty of marrying a rigid structure of classroom sessions with a flexible model of online provision.

ii) Recognising the over-riding importance of motivation and obligation on the part of the learner

As with all adult learning, the key factor underlying relative success of the Spanish Steps courses was the motivation and 'learning discipline' of the learners:

"Students must maintain persistence, enthusiasm, personal commitment and a clear focus in order to succeed in a distance learning situation. Self-direction, a passion for learning, and strong individual responsibility are important influences on achievement." (Frank *et al.* 2003, p.59).

Indeed, other research suggests that distance education works best for more mature, motivated, well-organised and already accomplished learners (Rintala 1998). Moreover, e-learning has been found by other researchers to work best with highly motivated learners:

"[internet- based learning] is more suitable to the student who is imbued with the following qualities: persistence; ability to study independently; highly motivated towards learning; mature enough to learn according to such a method; and having exceptionally good organisational ability." (Frank *et al.* 2003, p.69).

There was a sense that the hybrid courses were attracting some individuals who were finding conventional adult language classes difficult to commit to - learners who could be referred to as 'tippers' because the course format tipped them into learning.. As such the low institutional demands of the Spanish Steps courses (i.e. in terms of weekly attendance, time and money spent on course, lack of formal assessment or end-of-course certification) were attractive to these learners: it could be said that the courses were attracting people for whom they were not best suited. In terms of establishing and maintaining high levels of motivation in the learners it appeared that there was little which could be done about this. For example, learners seemed to shy away from tutor/peer contact either by email or telephone. It was also noticeable from the learners' perspective that some apparent 'dropouts' did not see themselves as such - still intending to carry on with the website at their own pace, albeit not in synchronisation with the classroom sessions. It could, therefore, be argued that some learner 'dropout' from e-learning courses is accepted as an inevitable extension of the flexible ethos which the courses are provided under.

iii) Recognising discrepancies between 'low-technology' learners and 'high technology' educational providers

When considering the design of e-learning materials, as Chen (1997) distinguishes, there are delivery problems (i.e. technological means of conveying information) and educational problems (i.e. the activity of learning). Educationally there was little to suggest that the majority of the Spanish Steps site was not a good and useful learning resource. Milton (2002, p.2) suggests a useful list of criteria for good quality technology-based language learning materials which Spanish Steps could be said to satisfy, i.e.:

- Likely to be the product of an intelligently thought-out approach and method
- Possess a clear set of objectives within that method and approach
- Set at an appropriate language level for the learner
- Appropriate to the age and interests of the learner
- Motivating to the learner
- Possess an appropriate range of relevant activities
- Engage the learner in the meaningful use of the language
- Last sufficient time and provide sufficient meaningful repetition for learning to take place

- Understandable, quick and easy to use for both learners and, where appropriate, their teachers

However, this is of little use if learners are unable to access the learning materials online. There is a definite and widening gap between the technological ability of educational providers to develop 'high tech' and 'high spec' online learning materials and the relatively 'low-tech' resources which learners have in order to access them (i.e. computer hardware/software *and* skills/experience).

Just as language learning textbooks must be written in a style appropriate to the literacy levels of the target learners, then online learning materials must be authored in a style appropriate to the computer literacy levels of the learners. The evidence from this small evaluation - and our much more extensive research on adult learners in general - suggests that educational providers consistently over-estimate what learners are capable of using computers for. Most computer users, even 'expert users', rely on a limited repertoire of applications and skills which they use. This is exemplified by the hybrid learners' difficulties in successfully downloading the supporting software needed to be able to view the video segments of the course. Whilst such software packages are industry standard platforms for viewing video/sound, they are not standard packages for most 'ordinary' computer users who use ICT on an occasional and limited basis. Although learners may own computers at home it should not be assumed that they are competent users.

It is not enough to assume that these 'low tech' problems are temporary and that in a few years time the bulk of the population will have progressed in what can be considered 'typical' use of ICT. To ignore these technological barriers in the hope that they will diminish causes considerable inconvenience to learners in the short term as well as ignoring the ever-changing capacity of ICT. Although most computer users may be competent users of today's standard software packages, in five years time it is more than likely that far more sophisticated and different packages will be 'industry standard' by then. In short there will always be a technological gap between what online learning materials can do and what the general public are able to use them for. This gap must be considered in the design and development process of e-learning materials if they are to be widely used. There is definitely a need to include the 'low-tech' learner in the instructional design of e-learning materials.

Moreover, the additional technological constraints of using computers in public access sites should be considered. Learners in public sites are often not able to download programs needed to support video, sound and other extra materials, are using computers which do not have powerful video or sound capabilities and have a limited time of use which they are reluctant to waste waiting for complex web pages to download. One conclusion to all these problems is to develop two versions of any e-learning material in the same style as websites which are authored in 'text-only' and 'frames' versions, or 'flash' and 'non-flash' versions which users can choose according to their situation. In this way neither 'high-tech' or 'low-tech' learners are inconvenienced. That said, it should be noted that the BBC produced two such versions of the Spanish Steps website. The problem here, given learners' reluctance to themselves choose the most technologically 'suitable' version, is to 'channel' learners to the appropriate version of the website.

iv) Importance of getting institutional factors right in the 'e-learning' model

Having considered individual and technological issues it should be also remembered that there are major institutional effects on hybrid courses such as Spanish Steps. Indeed, the institutions in which the courses were delivered had a key influence on the effectiveness of the courses. This was perhaps overlooked in the development of the prototype project but with hindsight proved to be crucial. For example, the different ways in which the institutions enrolled the learners, the times of day the sessions were provided and the conditions of learning during the sessions were all key factors in the attraction and retention of learners to the courses.

At one extreme, the final session in one site where only one learner and one 'drop-out' attended came after a second session where none of the computers were operational in the computer room where the lesson was held. To underline the institutional effect, this third session could not have taken place even if more learners had

attended, as the site was closed for the morning and the tutor and two learners were not allowed access to the building.

The institution is also crucial in the recruitment of learners to the course. It was noticeable that some of the sites had recruited learners who were either friends of college staff/other staff working in the building or unsuccessful applicants from other 'traditional classroom' courses. Whilst this reflected the very pressing need to implement the courses, learners of this nature were perhaps not as likely to benefit from the compulsion derived from a genuine 'first choice' enrolment.

The institution also played a key role in the initial presentation of the web page to the learners - thus setting the context for learners' subsequent use of the web page. In institutions where the downloading of video, sound and supporting materials were demonstrated unsuccessfully to learners, this had obvious effects on learners' perceptions and expectations for later use. Research into computers and learning has shown that the initial ways in which learners are presented to ICT have profound effects on the effectiveness of their subsequent use. In this respect the institution, as well as the tutor, should be seen as 'key introducers' of e-learning materials in hybrid courses.

v) Increasing rather than widening participation

There is also a tension throughout the current e-learning agenda as expressed by the DfES, LSC and others, between merely *increasing* levels of participation in education and *widening* levels of participation in education. We know a lot, from the body of research in this area, about the nature and attitudes of those who do not currently participate in formal education and training after compulsory schooling, i.e. individuals who are unemployed, female, older, socio-economically disadvantaged, less qualified and with less favourable attitudes towards institutional learning. Thus, if the rhetorical claims of reducing social exclusion via e-learning are to be believed (e.g. LSC DELG 2002), such individuals form the key target-group for the government's lifelong learning agenda. Nevertheless, the fact that ICT continues to be more attractive to those individuals who are most likely to be already engaged in learning casts significant doubt over this aim.

There was evidence that the Spanish Steps hybrid courses were increasing levels of education by attracting learners who would not have learnt via the website otherwise. However, there was little to suggest that participation was being widened to include other disadvantaged groups. This reflects the emerging consensus in the academic literature that there are more fundamental problems to participation in education than purely technical and infrastructural issues. For example, as Kennedy-Wallace (2002, p.49) recently reminded us:

"Whether learning online in the workplace, in college or at home, e-learning is still about learning and culture, not just technology and infrastructure. However, much of the debate in the past decade has been captured by the wizardry of the internet and marketing hype."

Whilst the temptation for politicians to overstate the impact of their policies is understandable, there has been a tendency for even reasoned and cautious commentators to concur with the surrounding hype and uncritically attribute ICT with expansionist and transformatory powers. Despite the overwhelming evidence that participation in adult learning is not being radically altered, the government, media and educational community remain convinced of the ability of ICT to act as a 'technical fix'. Our concern here is that the overwhelming attention being paid to ICT may be acting as a distraction or impediment to more prosaic (but arguably more effective) interventions aimed at altering patterns of poverty and social disadvantage, or encouraging rather than destroying non-certificated learning opportunities. We therefore need to be realistic about what ICT can and cannot be expected to achieve if we are to harness its educational potential.

Concluding questions

As previously mentioned, the 'e-language learning for adults' prototype courses could be considered a qualified success for most of the learners who were involved in the hybrid courses. Yet, as a small-scale initiative, it has proved more valuable in highlighting areas of 'e-learning' and hybrid learning which require more development and refinement if such potentially powerful models of learning are to be practically successful. As Waight *et al.* (2002) contend, there are a host of organisational, process and individual issues to be considered - some of which have been highlighted in the course of this report. Alongside these specific issues we can also conclude with a short list of wider questions which emerge from this case study and need to be addressed by the 'e-learning community' as the theoretical basis of learning begins to be practically implemented on a wider scale:

- Although hybrid courses like Spanish Steps appear successful in widening participation in e-learning, how can hybrid learning be developed to widen rather than increase participation in language learning and learning in general?
- How does this hybrid model of online and offline provision need to be changed to make it more effective?
- What institutional conditions would enable hybrid language learning prototype courses like Spanish Steps to work well in the future?
- What is the most effective balance between the flexibility of e-learning and the imposed structure of traditional language learning models, bearing in mind that the requirements of the learner should be central to the process?
- To what extent can e-learning be expected to impact upon people's existing motivation and disposition towards language learning? How else can government and providers positively impact upon people's motivation and disposition towards learning in general and language learning in particular?

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