

## **TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE SYSTEM OF DISTANCE LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents the possibilities and benefits of distance learning. Also, the article is devoted to distance learning, which implies an individually differentiated approach to learning foreign language. The author believes that this form of training allows the student to choose the time and place for training, as well as to use new information technologies in training, to carry out various joint projects with students from other regions. Information technologies of distance learning allow conducting classes in a foreign language in a videoconference mode and provide controlled independent work of students.

**KEYWORDS:** students, individual, remote, foreign language, computer, training.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Distance learning technologies present many new options for teaching foreign languages that will further expand the range of instructional techniques in the same way that language labs, television, and computers have augmented the standard classroom. It is important in reviewing these distance learning options to distinguish among their various levels of capability as these systems place different constraints on the instructional process. For instance, one-way, presentation-only systems have been criticized as providing nothing more than a video distribution system that could be replicated by mailing video tapes to students. The lack of immediate two-way interaction that characterizes many distance education programs seems contrary to the aims of foreign language teaching. However, with this interaction appropriately used, distance technologies can support the goals of foreign language pedagogy. Instructional strategies that encourage student-teacher and student-student dialogue and learner autonomy in distance learning situations must be incorporated into instruction

Among numerous modes of technology enhanced learning there are not many that have received as much attention as distance learning. Stimulated by the recent rapid developments in Web technologies, researchers in both ICT and education are constantly working to make the most of technological resources and put them to the best pedagogical use. In the area of foreign language teaching a lot has been done to cover a variety of world languages, but there are constant attempts for new solutions, taking into consideration specific needs of language learners.

### **WHAT IS DISTANCE EDUCATION?**

In a general sense, distance education, some call it open learning, mainly serves learners who cannot attend face-to-face courses or programs for one or another reason. Learners stay at home or office and follow the course, do the assignments, and interact with each other and the teacher via internet. In other words, they take the responsibility of their own learning, which means that learner autonomy is of great importance. Sampson (2003:104) defines distance learning as "... a mode of delivery (independent learning at a distance through the means of self-study texts and noncontiguous communication)".

Are the materials developed by specialized teachers used effectively as in face-to-face courses in distance education? Who controls the materials? and so on. Besides these negative opinions, some researchers state that students are not alone in the process, but they are in a constant interaction between teachers and their peers. Although there appears opposition to distance education, it seems to continue to catch the attention of educators, teachers, and learners in the future.

Relevant studies Research about distance language education courses in general focuses mainly on the effectiveness of teaching language skills, technological aspects in language teaching, and autonomous learning.

For instance, Sole and Hopkins (2007) contrast two approaches to distance language learning on the basis of providing practice in four language skills, designing appropriate assessment strategies, and learners' contribution to the educational context. They analyze distance educational philosophies of two universities clarifying some similarities and differences. They conclude that each university provide learners with good quality language courses, however, the writers point out that institutions wishing to carry out distance language courses need to reconsider their medium and long-term consequences about technology.

Similarly, Limpet (1991) mentions the lack of innovative development in distance language courses and states that individual language learning needs remain unmet. He maintains that in order to compensate for these disadvantages, upper-level skill instruction should be attached importance, more flexible modules must be produced, and less commonly taught courses must be included in the distance education programs.

In another study, White (2006) presents a critical overview of the distance language teaching and learning field. She states that distance language learning is conceptualized as the development of technology-mediated language learning opportunities. She maintains that there is a shift from the delivery of the content to facilitating transactions between, learners, teachers, and native speakers.

She emphasizes the importance of independent learner concept, but this is also replaced by collaborative learning community through distance education. Research on the attitudes of the students towards distance language learning is limited.

#### **WHY HASN'T THIS TWO-WAY OPTION BEEN USED MORE EXTENSIVELY?**

Using satellite broadcasts for true telecommunications, rather than merely as a delivery and distribution system for canned video presentations, is still very expensive. Television signals are more expensive to transmit than voice signals because of the increased amount of electronic information that must be transmitted. Because sufficient information is transmitted to refresh the video display screen thirty times a second, most of this information is associated with the video portion of the signal. To reduce the amount of information transmitted and, therefore, the communication costs, newer technologies compress the audio and video signals prior to transmission. For the same reason, they also refresh the video image at a slower rate, which makes the movements of the teacher and students appear blurred and choppy. Although this level of resolution is adequate to establish two-way communication for video teleconferences, the picture sampling rate is inadequate to capture detailed lip movements, giving the impression that the audio track is not always synchronized with the picture. This lack of video detail is normally only a minor irritant, but it could be important in trying to teach or demonstrate correct pronunciation.

#### **WHY IS DISTANCE LEARNING USED?**

The strongest argument for distance education is its potential to provide instruction to students who, because of distance, time, or financial constraints, do not have access to traditional learning opportunities or specialized courses (Davis, 1988). Distance learning courses have been developed to provide equal access to an educational opportunity for schools, especially rural ones that have to operate with a limited curriculum and staff (Wohlert, 1989). The objective is to provide courses in foreign languages to schools where it would not otherwise be possible for students to study them. The potential for providing instruction in the less commonly taught languages is particularly enhanced by distance technology. In many cases, the guiding principle is for distance learning courses not to become permanent, but to serve as a stepping stone to hiring a regular classroom instructor by laying the basis for a viable language program, especially in the less commonly taught languages (Kataoka, 1987).

They conclude that the distance education makes the learner learn through the medium of the printed word and other technological tools. They examine post-graduate students' attitudes towards web-based distance learning. They make use of a questionnaire and a demographic survey to gather the data. The results of their study indicate that there is a general positive attitude towards distance learning. Female students' attitudes are found to be more positive compared to males. The researchers maintain that most of the students find feel more comfortable in distance learning although some express boredom during the activities on the web.

### **HOW EFFECTIVE IS FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING VIA DISTANCE LEARNING?**

Several studies have been conducted on student achievement in distance education foreign language courses, but because of small sample sizes or non-random selection of students, the results are difficult to interpret. In university-level Japanese, no statistically significant differences were found between the classroom-based students at North Carolina State University and the students participating in the "Televised Japanese Language Program" (Kataoka, 1987).

In one experimental study, researchers found that after two semesters of German instruction, students enrolled in a telecourse did not achieve the proficiency levels attained by on-campus students taking the same course (Johnson and Van Iten, 1984). However, in the case of high school "German by Satellite" classes, where the university textbook and other materials are used, and where grades are based on university standards, the test data indicated that 18 percent of all students in the program were earning an unadjusted grade of A. In addition to test scores, "German by Satellite" students had top placement in seven interscholastic contests (Wohlert, 1989).

### **WHAT ARE SOME KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS?**

- Live interaction between the instructor and the students during the course.
- The presence of a classroom teacher in the remote sites who is involved in the learning process. In some cases, these cooperating or coordinating teachers are studying the language along with the students with the intention of completing a teaching minor.
- The regular use of other media, such as computers, speech recognition devices, audiotapes, and workbooks in a comprehensive approach to distance learning (Wohlert, 1989).
- The involvement and support of school administrators.
- The use of electronic mailboxes (which all students and cooperating site teachers use), or a toll-free phone number with recording machine.

### **CONCLUSION**

Both quantitative and qualitative findings gathered through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview indicate that distance English course generally meets students' expectations. However, some skills such as listening, speaking and writing are evaluated as weak parts by most of the students. It is considered that presenting and integrating language skills in face-to-face language courses needs to be planned well beforehand. When it comes to distance language learning courses, it is more challenging. Actually, it seems to be difficult to organize assignments in distance language courses, but when it is planned well, the reactions will be probably better. The study yields not only negative aspects but also some positive findings about the distance English course. For instance, a great majority of the students enjoy distance English course since it enables them to follow the lesson independent from time and place. This flexibility can be regarded as one of the main strongest aspects of the distance course. This study deals with only one distance education program in a one state-funded university. A wider and more comprehensive study can be conducted by comparing two or three programs with more students in the further research. It is hoped that this case study will give some hints about the nature of distance language courses and their improvements for the following programs.

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