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THE IDEA OF DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Rapid developments in information and communications technology, together with societal changes, have increased awareness of and demand for distance education – and now also for online learning, and distributed learning. Other forces have contributed to expansion, such as the current growing demand for global education offerings, and the desire on the part of many institutions to reach new audiences or to retain their market share. All this means that distance learning opportunities are becoming an increasingly visible part of educational provision.

Many language learners, language teachers and institutions are coming to distance education for the first time. However, distance language learning is not a new phenomenon. What makes it appear so is the development and wide availability of the new technologies for connecting learners and teachers, the rapid pace at which these have developed, and the widespread publicity they have attracted. More traditional forms of distance language learning, that used print, audio and video materials are being supplemented by opportunities for interaction and collaboration online. The social and technological changes that prompted expansion are also transforming the nature of distance learning. They have resulted in new contexts for learning, new ways of learning and new roles and responsibilities for participants.

There is now broad interest in innovation in distance language learning, both from distance language professionals, and from others who are interested in the possibilities offered by online learning environments. A number of factors have invited new providers to enter the field: a belief in the accessibility and convenience of online technologies, the need ot be in the front line of progress, and a perception that distance teaching is time- and cost-effective. A web search on the International Distance Learning Course Finder showed that more than 1,300 language courses were registered – out of a total of 55,000 distance courses from 130 countries. And the number of providers entering the market to provide online or distance courses for language learners is growing. While distance education has achieved a new

prominence, much about the processes involved and the participants remains little understood. The new technologies provide institutions with access to new audiences, but bring with them relatively little information about these audiences in order to inform their practices. Important aspects of the learning experience are transformed in the distance context, but whereas the tendency has been to focus on technology as the defining feature, experienced distance educators and commentators argue repeatedly that technology perse is not as important as other factors such as learner motivation, an understanding of the distance language learning context and of the demands it places on participants, the responsiveness of the teacher, the accessibility of the learning context, and the overall context of delivery.

This chapter introduces the idea of distance language learning in all its diversity. Examples of different contexts for distance language learning are explored, and the ways in which they vary. I then examine the meaning of distance, its relationship to time and place and to learning opportunities. A brief discussion of definitions of distance education and distance learning is used to highlight the difference between a focus on structural considerations as a starting point for understanding distance language learning, as opposed to pedagogical concerns. A brief overview of different generations of distance learning opportunities is given, all of which continue to contribute to current practice. From here I return ot an overview of the landscape of distance language learning, and to the particular challenges it presents for learners.

There is no one definition of distance education. In fact there is no one term to define as the term distance learning is also well accepted and widely used. Distance education and distance learning are often used as synonyms or near synonyms in the field. In the European context, distance learning is generally perceived to be a more learner-centered term, and is also used here.

The series of definitions below indicate the range of approaches which have been used in defining these two key terms in the field, all of which emphasise distance – in space and/or time – between teacher and learner.

The term distance learning or distance education refers ot the teaching-learning arrangement in which the learner and teacher are separated by geography and time.

Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements.

Distance learning is an educational system in which learners can study in a flexible manner in their own time, at the pace of their choice and without requiring face-to-face contact with a teacher.

Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and students occurs noncontiguously.

Distance education must involve two-way communication between teacher and students for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication.

There are several starting points for a definition of distance education; most begin with structural concerns, a few begin with pedagogical concerns, and fewer still begin with learner-based perspectives of the meaning of distance learning. When distance education is approached from the point of view of organisational or structural concerns, definitions generally include the following components, based on the work of Keegan:

• The separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place.

• The influence of an educational organisation in preparing and delivering materials and in providing support services. This distinguishes distance learning from private study contexts, and learning using open courseware.

• *The use of a range of media* including print, audio, video, and computer- based applications to carry content.

• The use of communication devices to facilitate two-way communication. Providing opportunities for interaction is an important challenge, and these are increasingly viewed as integral to distance learning experiences.

• The possibility of face-to-face contact usually in the form of tutorials, regional courses, summer schools, and self-help groups. Face-to-face contact serves the

function of providing motivation, social contact, group cohesion, and opportunities for support. In some language courses attendance may be mandatory.

• The provision of a range of support services, including what is given by the teacher, relating to wider aspects of study and the role of the distance learner.

The nature of opportunities for distance language learning are diverse and still evolving. Distance language programmes include a wide range of elements and practices ranging from traditional print-based correspondence courses, to courses delivered entirely online with extensive opportunities for interaction, feedback and support between teachers and learners, and among the learners themselves. The overview aims to give some sense of the ways in which distance language learning opportunities are inflected in different contexts.

Distance learning opportunities are offered within a range of cultural, educational and institutional settings, each with their own influences, which means that the terms distance learning and distance education can be applied to language learning programmes with markedly different features.

While the distinction between individual- and group-based systems is important, developments in technology have made it possible ot combine individual and collaborative learning opportunities.

The traditional model of education is that learning and teaching take place in close proximity, at a particular point in time. However, in distance education the focal point of learning is no longer the classroom but has shifted to the home, or the workplace, or a study context. Learning may take place according to each learner's schedule and in different time zones, or it may take place at set times. Distance can be seen in relation to the two dimensions of time and place.

Distance language courses may make use of the same place dimension in face-to-face tutorials or summer schools and through access ot regional study centres. Most distance language learning, however, takes place in the different place dimension. It offers possibilities for synchronous learning, when opportunities are fixed at a point in time, and asynchronous learning, which can be accessed at any time.

Asynchronous distance language learning involves learning opportunities that can be accessed at any time, and which make use of, for example, print, video, CD-ROM, e-mail and computer conference discussions.

The advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has provided a range of possibilities for asynchronous communication, through e-mail, discussion lists, computer conferencing and bulletin boards. In distance language courses that make use of CMC, new opportunities for interaction with the teacher and with other learners counter the traditional and awkward isolation of distance language learners. CMC has also opened up possibilities for interacting with native speakers in tandem learning opportunities. The advantage of asynchronous interaction is that learners can participate and respond ot their convenience, there is time for thought and reflection between responses, and it is possible to revisit discussions at a later date. Synchronous distance language learning uses technologies that allow for communication in 'realtime', for example by telephone or chat rooms.

The time and opportunity for learners to participate is controlled, which means of course that it is a less flexible option. Synchronous systems can be highly motivating in that distance learners feel less isolated and gain energy and inspiration from the learning group. Mason notes that this can be further enhanced by the fact that 'real-time interaction with its opportunity to convey tone and nuance helps to develop group cohesion and the sense of being part of a learning community'.

Thus synchronous interactions may feel more like a live conversation, and are more spontaneous. Feedback plays a very important role in distance language learning, and synchronous systems permit immediate feedback by the teacher, as well as providing opportunities for the development of feedback within the learning group. One of the key challenges in distance language learning is the development of interactive competence, particularly in realtime, and synchronous learning opportunities are important for this.

However, not all learners respond equally well to the loss of flexibility that is part of synchronous distance learning. While some learners prefer the structure provided by the regular timing of synchronous delivery – ot have the course delivered

in regular sessions at fixed times and to have their learning paced in this way – others find it a very real limitation.

Multi-synchronous learning

Many distance education providers now combine synchronous and asynchronous forms of delivery in order to bring together the benefits of both forms of provision. The term multi-synchronous is used by Mason to refer to the combination of both synchronous and asynchronous media with the aim of capitalising on the advantages of both systems.

This is the most common way in which different media are used in distance language learning – to work together in a complementary fashion. The course brought together the following elements:

• interactive satellite television linking remote classes (synchronous);

• Internet-based web board for holding chats during office hours (synchronous), for posting and reviewing homework and for class announcements (asynchronous);

• e-mail for sending messages, homework and feedback on submitted work (asynchronous);

• face-to-face meetings held at the start of the course as part of an orientation week (synchronous).

One of the interesting and under-researched areas of distance language learning relates to the kinds of adjustments that occur as a course evolves with new groups of students, usually in response to the experiences ofparticipants, pedagogical developments, and further refinements in technology.

These often include fundamental decisions about the balance between synchronous vs asynchronous learning opportunities.