
FORUM

Distance Education in Foreign Languages

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There are solid advantages to a distance education approach to foreign language acquisition. Practical aspects are important, such as classtime flexibility, cost savings, remote access, and flexible program sequencing for students with disabilities or special needs, but these well-known positive features are not the only significant considerations. When the practical arrangements of distance learning are a better match with student needs than on-site instruction, interesting phenomena occur and have been documented. One particularly counterintuitive phenomenon is that some of the communicative functions of language can be accomplished even more effectively in an electronic environment than when students and teacher are face-to-face. Of course one must be selective, because not all possible language-related electronic activities will provide a high quality experience, but it is worth examining those that do. Advantages beyond the pragmatic ones listed above include student-centeredness, relevance for fulfillment of the National Foreign Language Standards, and bearing on extending the theories of Second Language Acquisition. However, handled poorly, these same areas which give distance learning an advantage over traditional classroom experiences can give rise to disadvantages as well.

Some distance learning models require the student to do something at every phase of the program to keep activities occurring, most notably in the CD-ROM and web-based delivery models. Typically, students insert the CD or log onto the website and then must actively click and choose or write and send all the time for something to occur. The process is quite the opposite of watching television. Brainwave tracings of students watching television reveal an almost-asleep rhythm, which is not surprising in view of the passive nature of television. Once the set is on, the programs continue unaided. If a program is boring enough, people may trouble themselves to click to a more interesting program, but there they settle back into passive watching. In contrast, brainwave tracings of students using dis-

tance learning programs via CDs, Internet, or call-in interactive video programs, show a very alert rhythm, which is also not surprising in view of the active nature of such courses (Haseltine). This distinction is made here specifically to exclude any so-called “distance learning” programs that allow passivity. It must be a “lean forward, do something” environment to qualify as “distance learning” these days.

Given an active environment, distance learning has a major impact on second language acquisition and retention, attributable primarily to students’ constant choosing. Research now accumulating is showing that as students make their various choices in an interactive format they often are also tailoring the program to their needs. One of the best recent examples is the set of classes which required chatroom interaction on topics allowing the students a range of choices, monitored at Washington State University during fall 1999 (Payne). The students who participated in the chatrooms twice weekly instead of attending their usual university classroom improved more in both writing and oral skills than did the students who spent those same two time periods in the classroom. The increased performance abilities are directly attributable first to more interaction than what can be arranged in an on-site class, and second to students having to choose which topics to pursue and what vocabulary words to use.

A further example of the greater learning produced by student-centered foreign language classrooms is documented in cognitive styles investigations (Ehrman, Hokanson, Oxford). When students are able to choose whether they are engaged in grammar-clarification activities or in whole language activities, they learn faster than students who must deal with topics lock-step in the sequence presented by the professor. The distance learning environment is far superior to the traditional classroom in the number of pedagogically sound choices it can comfortably present to each student. Both the action of choosing as well as the matching of cognitive style preferences to activities available lead to greater increments in language functioning, receptively and productively. It is important to note that students do characteristically choose activities that match their cognitive styles (Ehrmann, Hokanson, Oxford), so the choosing is important not just for the “buy-in” which involvement provides, but also for providing the least cognitively abrasive learning situation.

When using distance tools, students actively control their learning environment in its repeatability too. An activity, segment, or program can be repeated in part or whole, if something was not clear the first time. Some activities require students to look at a video clip again and, for example, instead of taking a cloze test (filling in blanks strategically left so as to check grammar or comprehension), students are instead asked to provide a different ending or react to its content in some

other way. Again, the student usually has control of how many times to take the cloze section before attempting the response to content section. Likewise, audio segments used as prompts can be repeated as many times as the student needs in order to feel confident of understanding. Such individual control of language exercises is not generally possible in a teacher-led classroom with 25 students or more.

Traditional classrooms are good for providing the interpersonal dynamics during paired work and group discussions, but even that can be done better in an on-line environment if the environment is carefully arranged (Payne). The improvement in oral skills (mentioned above) as a result of chatroom foreign language participation is attributed to: a) the student-centered nature of the interaction, mimicking that of the classroom but with more social pressure to write something, since, unlike the face-to-face situation, a student is only “present” when saying something; b) the greater opportunity for each student to comment because all can write at once without appearing rude, unlike speaking when sitting nearby a partner; c) the greater amount of time available to think through one’s sentences before submitting them, contributing to practicing correct verb conjugation and correct sentence formation; d) the subvocalization (or even vocalizing aloud) that goes on during keyboard use, which contributes to correct pronunciation and intonation; and e) the immediacy of feedback because the teacher can monitor more conversations at once than is possible when physically cruising a classroom of students conversing. Teachers who used to dread teaching their passive, after-lunch class find, in a distance environment, their students responding to the absolute necessity to do something to make their presence known in the chatroom, a much more active language-learning situation. Whereas in the former situation each student might speak only a few words in a whole class period, in the latter students have created many paragraphs while explaining their points of view. They often comment that they are surprised they could say so much in their foreign language!

Distance learning is student-centered in that most activities are projects, which students tailor to suit their interests, goals, and learning styles. With projects as the basis of the class, the on-line teacher functions as a coach, providing suggestions and resources like websites and design ideas, so the students create something that clearly grew from their own minds. For example, “web tours,” in which students decide which cities to visit, where to stay, what to eat, how much to spend, what sights to see, and so forth, then share their “trip” with classmates who can go “with” them to their websites, are far richer in student proactivity than what can be provided in a traditional classroom. In fact, the student involvement yields such

good results that electronic homework of this nature is being provided in physical classrooms as well as distance learning ones.

The distance learning environment makes it easier to teach to the National Foreign Language Standards. Examining the five headings expressing the primary goals of the Standards, i.e., of fostering “Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Community,” a distance-learning teacher can contend that there are more ways to include activities germane to these areas than with traditional use of textbooks and chalkboards. “Communication” activities include e-mail, listservs, and chatrooms as just discussed, employed for genuine exchange of ideas with others via the target language, usually about “Culture” facts and ideas. Communicative activities make “Connections” with other subject areas, such as math (figuring out how much a “trip” will cost), social studies (why one would not want to be a tourist in East Timor during the year 2000), and science (deciding what time of year has the best weather for visiting Madrid). “Comparisons” between the native and the target languages and cultures are frequent in such an activity, whether looking for money exchange rates or deciding on appropriate clothing for proposed attendance at an event. “Community,” language learning directly from contact with a community of target language speakers or the sharing of target language projects with local, non-target-language communities, often has to be a contrived, deliberate goal, just as it does in a physical classroom: teachers and students have to plan joint participation in activities with local groups.

Not only web-based activities, but CD-ROMs and video programs also give students powerful experiences in “Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Community.” Videos and CD-ROMs often provide plot-driven reasons for students to engage in target language activities; again, a “lean-forward” environment hard to match in a traditional classroom. Students trying to solve a mystery will keep trying to figure out clues and, as long as they are at a comfortable challenge level, will persist long after “class” has ended. Moreover, the instant feedback to the student is a clear, non-judgmental way to enable students to self-correct. The CD-ROM is not making a personal judgment about how stupid a student is. It is simply giving right and wrong responses, according to its program. Because students have often played many video games, machine feedback is readily accepted.

One advantage of distance learning in terms of Second Language Acquisition theory is in measurability of impact. Machines can be set to keep reliable, detailed records of student improvement under varying circumstances. Learning programs are often equipped for tracking error frequency and type, total word-production

under various stimuli, and rate of improvement. Accurate records allow statistically valid conclusions to guide not only program design but also insights into cognitive processes.

Krashen's postulated "I+1" (foreign language should be presented in increments just a little stretch from what the student already understands, i.e., "Input plus one new thing") can be very deliberately targeted (Krashen). Not only does this produce high interest for age-appropriate topics, but it allows measurement of what usually constitutes "one new thing" to be associated with the level of L2 (second language) improvement. The amount of short-term memory storage compared to long-term memory for vocabulary acquired under different circumstances (different amounts of the "+1" part of Krashen's theory) can easily be measured. Measurements produce insights into cognitive processes in general and linguistic acquisition specifically, extending the frontiers of knowledge about thought and memory.

Content based projects and functional communication which form the preponderance of distance learning activities appear to be stored in memory the way episodes of life are stored, not the way "facts" are stored. Episodes are more easily retrievable than facts (Stevick). Taken together these two ideas begin to form an explanation of why communication in an L2 is more effective language learning than is learning facts about an L2. The National Standards (five "C's" listed above) are accomplished via linking to what students already know, and, in a distance learning environment this means that students have many means of bridging to new understanding that they don't have in a regular class, as well as some of the same ones. They can use dictionaries of course, whether electronic or paper, but they also have many more context-rich ways of making meaning without having to resort to translation. As mentioned above, students can have material repeated, use hypertext for explanations, replay video and audio segments, click to hotlinked sites with more background, using many tools not readily accessible from a physical classroom. Almost all of these tools involve more of an episodic experience than does, for example, the use of a paper dictionary.

The distance learning environment not only gathers more data on the learning process than can the classroom teacher, but also provides more memorable episodes, which further aids basic L2 research. Computers can consistently track student responses with a minute assembly of detail impossible for a teacher to sustain. Yet it is often in the minutia that a student's language hypotheses are revealed. Memorable computerized video episodes can be triggered by an active student to come with much greater frequency than memorable episodes can come in a traditional classroom. Some research is illuminating the relationship between a

student's theories about the way L2 grammar works and a student's production of clear, meaningful target language (Celce-Murcia). Student guesses about how the language works receive immediate confirmation or refutation in a computerized environment that they seldom receive so quickly or thoroughly elsewhere. At many points in most distance learning situations a student can obtain a brief grammar explanation as a confirmation/correction of guessing that has gone on up to that point in the program. Being able to get such feedback appears to calm student anxieties over lack of understanding. Less anxiety is associated with more L2 understanding and production, and more participation in episodes of meaningful language, which is an upward spiral of more efficient acquisition.

The disadvantage of distance learning can usually be overcome by careful planning. Distance learning should be about establishing relevance and providing a departure point for following one's own knowledge needs as far as the subject matter pursued within the language. Unfortunately, distance learning can also be about doing what the instructor says to do, such as certain activities in a text or available electronically, which are then followed by a quiz or test of some sort. With no other choices, the student is likely to tune out, figuratively or literally. To me this may be "distance teaching" but it is not "distance learning" because the learner is not engaged in choosing what and how to communicate in the new language. Moreover, because of the actual distance involved, the teacher may not be aware of the student's disengagement and so, unlike in a classroom, not be able to identify the unproductive student and help craft a more meaningful activity. A major disadvantage of distance learning is lack of teacher connection with the student, which is why meaningful interaction such as e-mail and chatroom activities are vital.

Students are notorious daydreamers. The absence of physically present social sanctions in a distance learning environment makes student involvement even more critical. A bored student does not merely daydream, but will turn off the computer or video player if activities are not engrossing. This is true whether students are taking the distance course as a class, seated in a classroom with other students, all participating in a program originating elsewhere, and it is true when a student is solitary, tuning in via Internet video streaming from Anchorage, Alaska.

A student-centered approach is necessary because passively sitting and watching a language video will yield about the same results as passively sitting in a foreign language classroom. In both situations students are generally listening intermittently but are not required to produce anything. Students who must call in

and participate in the activities that are going on usually formulate their questions carefully in Spanish before calling, a powerful memory aid.

There are certainly other drawbacks to distance learning, the most important of which is the failure of technology to function reliably. If malfunctions happen frequently at the beginning of a course, they may so discourage and frustrate students as to make them quit the class. CD-ROMs can fail to load, hotlinks to link, quizzes to deliver corrected answers, and chatrooms to open. Failures of technology or failures of users to deal with technology correctly, regardless, the student experiencing them will tend to reject the situation and move on to something yielding success. Most of the students dissatisfied with their distance learning experiences in the studies mentioned above (Payne) said they were dissatisfied because of frustration with electronic systems, too fundamental a frustration to permit continuance in the course, and therefore a major drawback.

Distance programs can be simply a lecture-repeat format, in which case none of the National Foreign Language Standards' goals would likely be met. Fortunately, the "talking heads" format is being replaced by activities requiring students to do something, choose alternatives, or craft a project. Lectures and even demonstrations are giving way to student-centered activities that lead to achievement of the Standards. Research shows that students completing those programs not productive of communicative episodes may not be much more L2-capable than when they began because only their fact-storage memory has been active, not their episode-storage memory (Stevick).

It is, of course, always possible to have the computers gather no data on student performance relative to the experiences provided; in fact, it is much easier not to add in the collection parameters. In such cases, no progress can be made in understanding how the mind processes a new language. This is a plea for those who are using distance learning tools to keep records, informing all who care about SLA as to the sorts of activities which function well with clearly defined populations at carefully measured levels of development.

Cost saving was mentioned earlier as an obvious, well-known practical advantage. It can also be seen as a disadvantage because distance-learning programs can be seen as threatening language teachers' job security. Nobody is likely to favor a system which makes their livelihood unnecessary. However, the fact that distance L2 education is much cheaper than funding standard classrooms should not make language teachers shy away from its support. After all, if SLA were considered easier and more fun, then more people of all ages would be interested in acquiring other languages, thus increasing the demand for foreign language teachers!

Research has shown that distance learning can be much better for the language student than a standard classroom, providing more individualized practice and more opportunities for genuine communication in the target language. It is also clear that the opportunities for a student to experience episodes in a foreign language make for a better memory trace, richer and longer lasting, and more available for building new language than simply memorizing facts about a language. Distance learning can be handled skillfully. It can arrange a great many choices among sound learning activities for the student, encouraging students to match their cognitive styles and preferences with the learning environment. This type of student-centeredness operates to fulfill both the spirit and the letter of the National Foreign Language Standards. Additionally, because it is also a facile fact-gathering environment, computerized formats also promote rapid accumulation of knowledge about linguistic processes occurring during second language acquisition; it is good science, based on empirical data. Language instructors who want the best experience possible for their students should at least give the interactive parts of distance learning a serious trial, and keep good records of the results. ☀

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