Speculations on Foreign Language Teaching: Distance Education Aspect

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Abstract

The paper studies distance education students' level of satisfaction and evaluations about distance Language courses. To this end, a Likert-type questionnaire was applied to 72 students attending an experimental distance education program in X educational institution. In addition, semi-structured interview was employed so as to verify the data gathered from the questionnaire. The results of the study revealed that a great majority of the students were satisfied with the experimental distance education Language course stating that the content, format, reading and grammar sections of the course were sufficient, but synchronous courses, listening, speaking, and writing sections were not satisfactory and sufficient both in quality and quantity.

Keywords: Distance Education; Distance Language Learning; Student Satisfaction; Educational Technologies; Synchronous Course

1.0. Introduction

The power of computers and the internet in the current century enables all learners to study at their home without having to attend a regular face-to-face course or school. In other words, recent developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have brought about various improvements facilitating people's lives. Learners who are unable to attend classes for one reason or another can study at their own pace independent from time and place. They can take various courses for a diploma, certificate, or a degree via distance education in a more flexible and interactive atmosphere. There is no doubt that these developments in educational technologies have spread to online or distance language learning and teaching field. Opportunities to learn languages through online or distance education are presented each passing day by private courses, colleges, schools, institutions, textbook companies, and universities. Accordingly, some of the universities in Uzbekistan offer distance education programs. A great number of students, and even teachers, enroll in distance learning programs in all levels, and try to complete the programs successfully. In the process of distance education in different programs, students take various courses depending upon their majors. Actually, students' thoughts and perceptions about these courses and whether these courses meet their needs or not are of great importance for the success and motivation of the students. A number of research (Sampson, 2003; Beare, 1989; Hilgenberg and Tolone, 2000; Jones, 1992; McCleary and Egan, 1989; Garrison, 1990; Holmberg, 1989) highlights satisfaction of students about distance education programs. However, there is rare research (Lambert, 1991; White, 2006; Rashid, Khokhar and Tahir, 2013; Işık, Karakış, and Güler, 2010) on students' satisfaction and needs about language courses through distance education. This study, therefore, investigates students' satisfaction and needs about experimental Language course in a distance education program offered in X university in Uzbekistan.

2.0. Literature Review

2.1. 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)". As Holmberg(1989:24) states, people prefer distance education for "the convenience, flexibility and adaptability of this mode of education to suit individual students' needs". Actually, distance education appears in the educational field as a new technique because of the increasing demand for these flexible and convenient aspects. Ohler (1991:22) emphasizes two aspects ofdistance education: "how it can change our approach to learning and how it can change us". In fact, what Ohler focuses on is related to innovation in education. Distance education mainly rises due to learners' needs for lifelong learning.

The rapid spread of distance education in the world not only offers learners and teachers great opportunities but also brings a lot of challenges. Learners are unsupervised, self-directed, independent, and expected to be more autonomous. This freedom brings many questions together such as Does it lead to low-quality education? 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.

2.2. 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, Lampert (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. Glisan, Dudt, and Howe (1998), in their study about two aspects of distance language learning: achievement and attitudes, found that distance programs could have a positive effect on achievement and attitudes. Similarly, Rashid, Khokhar, and Tahir (2013) analyze learners' attitude towards printed word in distance education. They conclude that the distance education makes the learner learn through the medium of the printed word and other technological tools. They maintain that the printed word provides real teaching by itself and it can be used as a substitute for the textbook.

Another study which focuses on learners' attitudes towards distance learning is by Işık, Karakış, and Güler (2010). 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.

3.0. Method

3.1. Participants

The study was administered to 72 experimental distance learning program freshman students attending an X state funded university in Uzbekistan. They took the course through distance education during 2018-2019 academic year. They had asynchronous courses for each lesson every week during the year. They also followed synchronous courses organized by

the DEC of the university. Synchronous courses were offered each week by the instructors of the lesson. Language courses during the academic year were taught by three instructors who were specialized in their field.

3.2. Data collection and analyses

Data were collected through a Likert- type questionnaire including 20 items which would be answered by the students on the base of six quality descriptive words: 1- Excellent, 2- Very Good, 3- Good, 4- Fair, 5- Poor, 6-Very Poor. The questionnaire was inspired, compiled, and redesigned by the researcher from the course evaluation form available on the University of Washington web page. The data gathered through the questionnaire were entered to Microsoft Excell and then transferred to SPSS 20 package program. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was found to be ,736 for 20 items. Factor analyses of the questionnaire revealed 5 dimensions explaining 93,504 % of the total variance. In order to verify the quantitative data, semi-structured interview was administered to randomly selected 20 students and the results were quantitized with the help of categorization and coding systems.

4.0. Results

In this part, findings about the data gathered through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview are presented. Percentage of the students' attitudes towards the distance language learning course is given by employing the tables in the first section. The second section deals with the findings about the semi-structured interview with the help of the related graphs.

4.1 Results of the questionnaire

Students' attitudes towards the Language Course are presented in Table 1 below. As it is emphasized below, the first statement was responded positively by almost all of the students. Their overall evaluations about the course range from good to excellent. The course content also was evaluated positively by all of the students. However, it is striking that the organization of the course was evaluated as 'Fair' by half of the students. This evaluation of the students indicates that proportion of the course components, asynchronous and synchronous parts need to be revised. Clarity of the course objectives were also criticized by most of the students as 'Fair' or 'Poor'. Effectiveness and usefulness of writing, listening, and speaking skills in the course were criticized negatively by most of the students. The reading sections were relatively perceived as positive and useful. These results show that the way of presenting language skills in the course should be improved to a great extent.

Table 1. Course Related Attitudes

Statements	EX	VG	G	F	P	VP
1. The FL course offered via distance education as a whole was:	25 %	50%	25%			
2. The course content was:	12,5%	25%	62,5%			
3. The organization of the course was:		12,5%	37,5%	50%		
4. Clarity of the course objectives was:		25%		37,5%	37,5%	
5. Usefulness of reading sections in the course was:			37,5%	37,5%	25%	
6. Usefulness of writing sections in the course was:			12,5%	12,5%	50%	25%
7. Usefulness of listening sections in the course was:			12,5%	25%	37,5%	25%
8. Usefulness of speaking sections in the course was:			12,5%	25%	37,5%	25%

EX: Excellent VG: Very Good G: Good F: Fair P: Poor VP: Very Poor

Table 2 deals with the findings about the instructor related attitudes. The contribution of the instructor to the course was evaluated as 'Good' or 'Very Good' by 87,5 % of the students. This result shows the confidence of the students in the instructor, which was verified with the results of item 13 as well. The feedback issue was evaluated as positive by half of the students and as negative by the other half. This finding also indicates the existence of a problem regarding providing feedback. The instructor's abilities and his/her approach to the students having different skill levels were also appreciated by most of the students.

Table 2. Instructor Related Attitudes

Statements	EX	VG	G	F	P	VP
9. The instructor's contribution to the course was:		37,5%	50%	12,5%		
10. Feedback provided by the instructor was:		12,5%	37,5%	37,5%	12,5%	
11. The instructor's overall abilities of conveying information were:	12,5%	50%	12,5%	12,5%	12,5%	
12. Tailoring of instruction to varying student skill levels was:	37,5%	25%	25%	12,5%		
13. Confidence of the students in instructor's knowledge was:		50%	50%			

EX: Excellent VG: Very Good G: Good F: Fair P: Poor VP: Very Poor

The following table indicates the attitudes towards the synchronous courses. As it is seen in Table 3, overall effectiveness and quality of these courses was appreciated by all students. This may be attributed to the nature of distance education programs since the students have the unique opportunity to meet and interact with the instructor and their peers during synchronous courses.

This result was also verified with the percentage of the students' involvement in these courses. Item 16 deals with instructor's help during the synchronous courses. 62,5 % of the students thought that instructor was helpful during the process. The most interesting result of this dimension of the questionnaire is that a great majority of the students found the time allotted for the synchronous courses to be insufficient. This result indicates that the duration and number of the synchronous courses need to be increased.

Table 3. Synchronous Courses Related Attitudes

Statements	EX	VG	G	F	P	VP
14. Effectiveness and quality of the synchronous courses were:	37,5%	37,5%	25%			
15. Time allotted for the synchronous courses was:	12,5%			37,5%	25%	25%
16. Instructor's help during the synchronous courses was:		25%	37,5%	12,5%	12,5%	12,5%
17. Your involvement in the synchronous courses was:			75%	25%		

EX: Excellent VG: Very Good G: Good F: Fair P: Poor VP: Very Poor

The fourth dimension of the questionnaire was about assignments related attitudes. Half of the students thought that the assignments were not clear enough. 75 % of the students were not aware of their responsibilities. These results indicate that the assignments in this distance language course should be re-designed and revised. Since the learner autonomy in distance education courses is of great importance, students' responsibilities and requirements should be well-defined.

Table 4. Assignments Related Attitudes

Statements	EX	VG	G	F	P	VP
18. Clarity of the assignments was:			50%	37,5%	12,5%	
19. Clarity of students' responsibilities and requirements was:			25%	50%	25%	

EX: Excellent VG: Very Good G: Good F: Fair P: Poor VP: Very Poor

The last dimension of the questionnaire was about grading system related attitudes. The findings reveal that 85,5 % of the students were not content with the grading system. This may be attributed to multiple-choice exam type as summative assessment. The course does not allow formative assessment for instructors and this leads to students' displeasure at the grading system.

Table 5. Grading System Related Attitudes

Statements	EX	VG	G	F	P	VP
20. Grading Techniques were:			12,5%	25%	62,5%	

EX: Excellent VG: Very Good G: Good F: Fair P: Poor VP: Very Poor

4.2. Results of the Semi-Structured Interview

In the semi-structured interview, three main questions were posed to 20 randomly selected students. The findings about the interview are presented in the following figures.
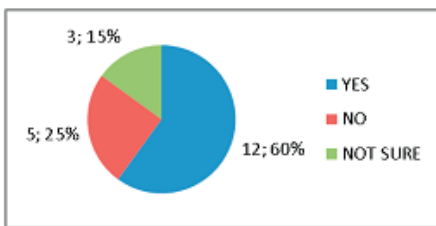
Q-1: Did the course meet your expectations?

Figure 1. Interview Results about Course Expectations

As it is clear in Figure 1, above 60% of the students thought that the course met their expectations. This percentage corresponds to 12 students in number. On the other hand, 25% of the students said 'No' stating that the course was not effective enough to meet their expectations. 15% of the students was not sure about whether the course met their expectations or not.

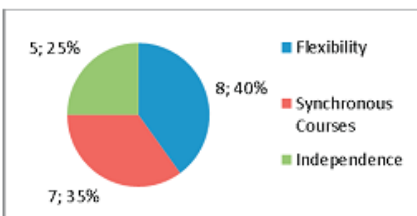Q-2: What three things did you like most about this course?

Figure 2. Interview Results about Students' Perceptions of the Course

In the semi-structured interview, students were expected to say three things they liked most about the course. 40% of the students thought that they liked 'flexibility' of the course most. 35% of the students stated that they enjoyed synchronous courses most, while 25% thought that they liked the notion 'independence' the distance course created. These results revealed that removing time and place limitations in the course seemed to please the students. Synchronous courses also had a positive impact on students.

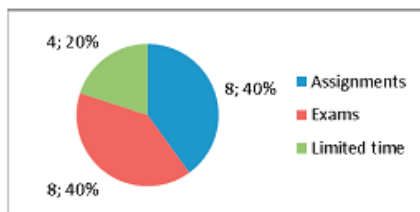Q-3: What three things did you like least about this course?

Figure 3. Interview Results about Students' Perceptions of the Course

As for the things the students liked least about the course, the figure above indicates the details. 40% of the students stated that they did not like the assignments in the course. Similarly, the other 40% thought that exams were among the things

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they liked least. 20%complained about time limitation in the synchronous courses. These results indicate that grading system and assessment techniques in the distance education English course need to be revised.

5.0. Discussion and Conclusion

Both quantitative and qualitative findings gathered through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview indicate that experimental distance Language 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. The negative perceptions of students about effective teaching of language skills may be attributed to this challenge. Providing feedback is another issue which is negatively evaluated. This may be because of the time limitation in the synchronous courses as synchronous courses provide students with almost the only opportunity to get feedback from the instructors. Assignments, grading techniques and clarity of students' responsibilities are also criticized by most of the students. Semi-structured interview verifies these results since almost half of the students states that assignments and exams are among the ones they like least about the course. 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 Language 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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