Computer-Based Technologies and Synchronous/Asynchronous Tools in Teaching Foreign Languages and Students' Independent Study

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Abstract

Today technologies have a significant impact on education. The roles of teachers and students are changing increasing the ratio of self-studying, and «education for life» is shifting to «lifelong education». Already, computer-based technologies are being actively incorporated into the educational process, specifically into teaching foreign languages, in many educational institutions. In this paper, the conditions of distance learning of a foreign language are considered. The analyses of the existing distance learning system facilities for language learning provided an opportunity to consider different approaches to the educational materials and modern technical means for professional language training. The main issues of providing opportunities for the practical teaching of languages using the types of synchronous or asynchronous interaction in conditions of distance learning are identified and the development of communicative competences supported by computer-based technologies is analyzed.

*Keywords***:** distance learning, E-learning technology, digital resources, webinar, blog, forum, chart, Skype, on-line testing, interactive textbook, videoconference, second language learners.

1.0. Introduction

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 non-contiguous 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 of distance 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.

2.0. Literature Review

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. Synchronous and Asynchronous Technology Tools of E-Learning

E-learning, an area of foreign language teaching, continues to be of interest to both practitioners and students engaged in the field. E-learning course design is usually based on ELT contexts with using webinars, video clips, audio scripts, forums, charts, ICQ, Skype, on-line testing, interactive textbooks and boards.

E-learning technology tools are divided into two large groups:
• synchronous learning tools: chats, ICQ, SKYPE, interactive whiteboards, videoconferences;
• asynchronous learning tools: e-mail, blogs, forums, Twitter, video and audio podcasts, on-line testing.

The asynchronous nature of network communications allows the users to be engaged in a dialogue, forum, or chart at any convenient time, regardless of time or their location. There are numerous advantages and disadvantages in both synchronous and asynchronous E- learning tools and data transmission.

Advantages of on-line synchronous communication tools:
• Useful to support face-to face contacts with the students;
• Sessions for decision-making become more efficient and effective;
• Give the feeling of direct voice contact in distance learning courses;
• Preserve the spontaneity and fluency of the speech similar to the real-life environment;
• Provide timely support of voice communication via instant feedback from the audience and management;
• Add immediacy, operative cooperation and personal contacts.

Advantages of on-line asynchronous communication tools:
• Give time and opportunity to consider the decision and think over the answer;
• Provide an opportunity for complete participation in the communication process at any time;
• The speech speed may be changed and the students with different language skills can be involved easily in the course;
• The ability to use low bandwidth communication channels;
• The participants of interaction do not depend on the time, the place, and the planning process;
• Participants should feel certain comfort when communicating in writing.

Disadvantages of on-line synchronous communication tools:
• The communication time is limited, there is little time for reflection left;
• The problem of planning may arise for the people in different time zones or those who are busy at work;
• They can require additional hardware and software;
• They require higher bandwidth channels for audio and video conferencing.

Disadvantages of on-line asynchronous communication tools:
• The participants experience lack of personal contact and verbal communication;
• It requires a longer period for group decision making;
• The feedback can be delayed for a few days or hours.

4.0. Webinars

Such interactive tool as a webinar (from «Web-based seminar») can be attributed to both categories: synchronous and asynchronous e-learning. In the event of students' participation in online webinar and listening to the teacher's lecture in real time and asking him a question via chat, we deal with synchronous training. If the record of webinar was downloaded from the site some time ago, in this case we use an asynchronous type of webinar and E-learning. Webinars are very convenient because the listeners and the participants can register for a webinar if they are interested in it, or watch recordings of the webinars if they fail to attend them in a real time. We should re-think what we do in classrooms now and in the future. First, we are to reflect on our current practice and discuss whether the approaches and techniques are still relevant. However, we must also recognize that the students we are teaching today were born in the digital age, while many of their teachers were not. How will new digital elements change and add more value to our teaching? As a result, the teacher-tutor-student relationships have been affected by these changes.

5.0. Weblogs (Blogs)

At the present time weblogs (blogs) are widely used in teaching process. A blog is a discussion or informational site published on the World Wide Web consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse chronological order.

- Personal blog enables every student to have his or her own web log. Students simply log on to the site to make their posts. These blogs are viewable to the entire class or just the tutor (at your option), and visitors can make posts or leave comments as well.

- Topical (group) blog is a collaborative space where students and tutors can share ideas while discussing a common topic. The uses of this feature are only limited by the tutor's imagination. Again, as the tutor, you control all access to these forums.

- Assignment blog is a new feature that allows tutors to post assignments for the class and later grade them in a private secure setting. Students can work on assignments over multiple online sessions and then submit them when they are finished. Tutors can subsequently grade the assignment, offer guidance or comments, or return the assignment to the student for further work.

Blog gives an opportunity to extend the time of the course; it enables each student to take an active part in the process of communication in a foreign language, to implement the principle of individual approach to education. It can be concluded that in the process of working with students the blog forms competencies in the following areas: foreign language listening comprehension of authentic material; written speech in a foreign language; creating and maintaining blog in a foreign language; searching for information on a given topic in a foreign language in the global network; analyzing the work, forming self-esteem in a foreign language.

6.0. Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the distance learning of foreign languages is a step forward. However, it demands creating a special educational course by a university that would permit to benefit from its obvious positive sides and to cope with some of the listed difficulties. Moreover, from a technical point of view, there are no obstacles to distance learning from educational institutions. The necessary infrastructure is already here. With the effective organization and widespread computer network development, despite the high costs at the initial stages, the economy and effectiveness of training can be beneficial for all its participants. The recent events taking place in the society require changes in the education system shifting its development according to the needs of an individual learner. At the same time, the possibilities of getting education remotely due to the achievement of a higher level of accessibility should be accompanied by an increase in the quality of teaching and learning. The question of the organization of reliable and effective foreign language acquisition still requires a great amount of attention from the pedagogical and scientific community.

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