Distance Education and Languages: Evolution and Change

Börje Holmberg, Monica Shelley, and Cynthia White (Eds.)
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Distance Education and Languages: Evolution and Change is a soft-cover book 342 pages in length on the subject of distance education as applied to language learning. The book contains 18 articles contributed by distance educators from Europe, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Hong Kong, most being from the UK Open University. The book is well organized; the spacing and clearly delineated sections in each chapter make the information contained in each more readily digestible. At the back of the book is a useful index of authors and subjects referred to throughout the book. At the end of each chapter is a complete bibliography that enables the reader to explore further the many references to linguistic theory and language-learning issues contained in the chapters.

As stated in the Introduction, the emphasis in this book is on a critical examination of current issues and on recent developments in the field of teaching languages at a distance. The chapters are divided into six sections.

1. Learner autonomy
The authors of the three chapters that form this section draw on their experience with distance learners of French, German, Spanish, and English at the UK Open University in order to discuss theories and practical issues related to student autonomy. Issues discussed include the importance of developing materials to promote autonomy, ways of developing in students the capacity for self-assessment and self-evaluation, and the use of computer-mediated communication to support collaborative autonomous learning. Reference is made to the difficulty of getting students to become independent, self-critical learners.

2. Learner perspectives and support
In section two focus is on the learner. Cynthia White explores the relationship between learner and learning context and stresses the need for further theory building to counteract the tendency for developments in distance language learning to be technology-led. Cristina Ros i Solé and Mike Truman emphasize the importance of feedback as part of the learning process using examples from an Open University Spanish course to

illustrate various kinds of feedback. The third article, based on a South African case study, explores the issue of student profiling and the need for student support if high dropout rates are to be avoided. The authors suggest a useful framework for supporting distance learners.

3. Development of intercultural competence

The first article in section three is based on research involving distance learners of German at the UK Open University. The learners use Auftakt, a course aimed at helping students develop intercultural competence (the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own). The authors come to the conclusion that the students in the program are interested in German life and culture, but the use of Auftakt seems to have little effect on attitudes already formulated. Areas for future research are suggested. The second contribution discusses programs for English-language professionals offered in Bulgaria in collaboration with the University of Manchester.

4. Methodology and course design

In this section, which illustrates the vital importance of course design, Börje Holmberg begins by discussing the theoretical aspects of modern language teaching at a distance and goes on to illustrate the methodological implications for certain theories, drawing on examples of exercises in French and German. Holmberg observes that each learner constructs his or her own knowledge by interaction with the subject matter. He concludes that explicit explanations are required in the distance teaching of modern languages as students' attention needs to be directed toward specific aspects of grammar and pronunciation. The second article by Cecilia Garrido describes the challenges faced by the designers of Spanish courses at the UK Open University. Several issues are discussed in detail, including tutor training, feedback, development of oral skills, the role of new technologies, and the integration of culture.

5. Learning environments

Section five provides a valuable insight into the use of various technologies to enhance the experience of learning modern languages by distance education. The contributors from Australia, the US, the UK, and Hong Kong discuss the benefits and potential problems of online course features. They show how course management software, chatlines, conferencing systems, and other online tools can foster greater student autonomy and creativity as well as interaction among students. Detailed descriptions are given of how online features such as the lexical look-up tool *Word Neighbors* and the conferencing system *Lyceum* can offer solutions to the challenges of distance language-learning.

6. Language teacher development

The final section is devoted to issues of teacher training via distance learning. One study from Sweden compares a distance education training course to one conducted on campus and concludes that the factors that lead to effective learning such as individualization, teacher interest, and support and interaction between students are common to both. A second article describes the use of the Primary Language Teacher Education: Autonomy and Self-Evaluation (PLEASE) Web site for teacher training. The final article by Do Coyle in the University of Nottingham explains how a unique pilot network of teaching and learning observatory sites has enhanced the training of future foreign-language teachers.

Target audience

This book contains a wealth of valuable information for educators and course developers working in the field of modern languages. The various contributions indicate that practioners from many countries face much the same challenges.

Because *Distance Education and Languages: Evolution and Change* contains a considerable amount of discussion of the theoretical aspects of language-learning at a distance and many scholarly references, it will be of interest to academics and language-teaching professionals.

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