Is Distance Learning an Effective Way of Teaching English?

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Abstract

Distance Learning (DL) has been defined as planned learning that takes place whenever there is a distance between teacher and student in time and/or space. (Kraemer, 2008) This study centers on distance language learning at major on-line universities in China, Spain and the United Kingdom. By looking at how English is taught at the undergraduate level at Shantou Radio and Television University, China's Open University, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Spain and the Modern Languages Program at the Open University, United Kingdom (UKOU), we can see that an effective program must meet three main challenges. These challenges consist of providing enough practice exercises, providing for a way for the language learner to contribute input and receive output from the course, and designing an affective assessment strategy that provides sufficient and targeted feedback to the learner. Aside from these challenges, this study also focuses on learning beliefs and metacognition as it relates to each learning culture. The three universities focused on in this review meet these challenges in different ways with varied levels of success.

Keywords: Distance language learning; English as a foreign language; China's Open University; Universitat Oberta de Catalunya; Open University; United Kingdom; practice; contribute; assessment; feedback

Is Distance Learning an Effective Way of Teaching English?

Considerable attention has been placed on distance learning in the past decade. Educators have incorporated a myriad of technology tools to assist with the learning process. Part of the literature review looks at the effectiveness of distance learning.

China

China's Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) is licensed to offer junior college diploma programs and/or undergraduate/degree programs at a distance (Xiao, 2008). Students enrolled in distance learning are expected to be highly autonomous and self-motivated. Once enrolled, the students are provided with a full package of multiple media learning materials. The students are then instructed to focus on linguistic competence at the expense of grammar, diction and spelling.

Students are in full control of a number of aspects of their learning including when they take courses, the pace at which they progress in the course and what to study. They are required to complete the activities by themselves, but also have the option of face-to-face or online tutorials to facilitate their study.

This form of distance learning provides a large amount of autonomy to these students, but many find the demands overwhelming. To assist, students are offered the opportunity to make appointments with tutors for personal counseling. These same tutors are available to monitor student progress in the course and offer continuous assessments with targeted feedback to aid the student and push him/her towards course completion. Graduation rates at CCRTVU's online university have remained strong with 82.8 percent of the students enrolled in 2001 graduating (Pan, 2001).

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain

A distinguishing characteristic of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) is that teaching and learning activities have taken place exclusively online, via a purpose-built virtual campus (Solé, 2007). Unlike the model used at the CCRTVU, language skills are developed by working closely with tutors who guide students through course materials and moderate online discussions in order to encourage student-to-tutor and student-to-student interaction. By doing this, the tutor hopes to promote a sense of community in the classroom.

With the community classroom approach, the student contribution is one of participation. Whereas China's CCRTVU offering concentrates on learning to speak English, the UOC model focuses more on learning to read, listen and write English. No real time spoken interaction is required at any time in the UOC distance language-learning program. Participation, therefore, consists primarily of postings to asynchronous discussion boards.

The tutor in the UOC model is there to encourage student-to-student or tutor-to-student interaction. The tutor posts feedback to online discussion boards. Students are able to see other students' performance and learn from their peers (Solé, 2007). In addition to the public feedback, the tutor for the course provides commentaries and feedback on an individual basis with suggestions on how to improve.

Complete online courses tend to have a higher dropout rate when compared to traditional brick and mortar offerings and the UOC no exception. The UOC reports a dropout rate of 39% (Grau-Valldosera, 2014).

Modern Languages Program at the Open University, United Kingdom

The United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) educational model places a strong emphasis on course materials, which are designed and written at the university's administrative

and production center (Solé, 2007). English language courses are largely based on "one-way" communication technologies (i.e. books, CD-ROMs, and web-based materials) (Bates, 2005). Students in this program may have contact with their peers in tutorials and informal study groups but for the most part the program emphasizes self-study in order to improve language skills. China's CCRTVU program is modeled after the UKOU program and also emphasis the self-study approach. Tutorials offered focus on providing further practice on the course material that the student is expected to review independently. These tutorials are limited and average only about 18-21 hours of the estimated 300-600 total hours of study time for each course.

Because student-to-student interaction is not a requirement of the UKOU educational model, learner contribution tends to be limited to what is referred to as "Student Marked Assignments". These are assignments that a student must complete independently then grade on his/her won to track learning progress.

A tutor does evaluate students based on work submitted for continuous assessment and uses these graded submissions to interact and provide individual feedback to students. This is intended to provide learners a way to establish a dialogue with their tutors and to give them an idea of how they are progressing through the course.

Much like what we have seen with China's CCRTVU and Spain's UOC, UKOU reports a higher dropout rates as an online university. In 2011, the dropout rate reported by UKOU was an overall 24.1% (Dropout rates fall at English universities, 2104).

Conclusion

In this study we have seen how China, Spain and the United Kingdom design distance language learning programs in order to teach English to non-English speakers. Both China's and

the United Kingdom's programs focus on learning to speak the language by studying course

materials via a self-study approach whereas Spain focuses more on teaching students to read,

listen and write in English by utilizing a tutor to guide students through course materials and

lead moderated online discussions. Although the overall dropout rate for these online courses is

greater than traditional, classroom learning, the methods used have proven effective but only

when the distance language learner is highly motivated with specific reasons for his/her study,

perceived progress, and appropriate tactics to maintain motivation. Learners must have strong

self-efficacy, which may lead to increased motivation and an internal focus of learning, must

have a metacognitive maturity, and must use initiative in dealing with anxiety arising from the

distance language learning process (Xiao, 2012). All methods must provide adequate amounts of

feedback via graded material, discussion board feedback or assignments that are relevant,

constructive and progressively challenging. Where we have seen that all three programs fail is in

the fact that they provide relatively few opportunities to obtain feedback from native or more

proficient speakers of the language, something which is viewed as crucial for language

acquisition (Lightbrown & Spada, 1999).

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