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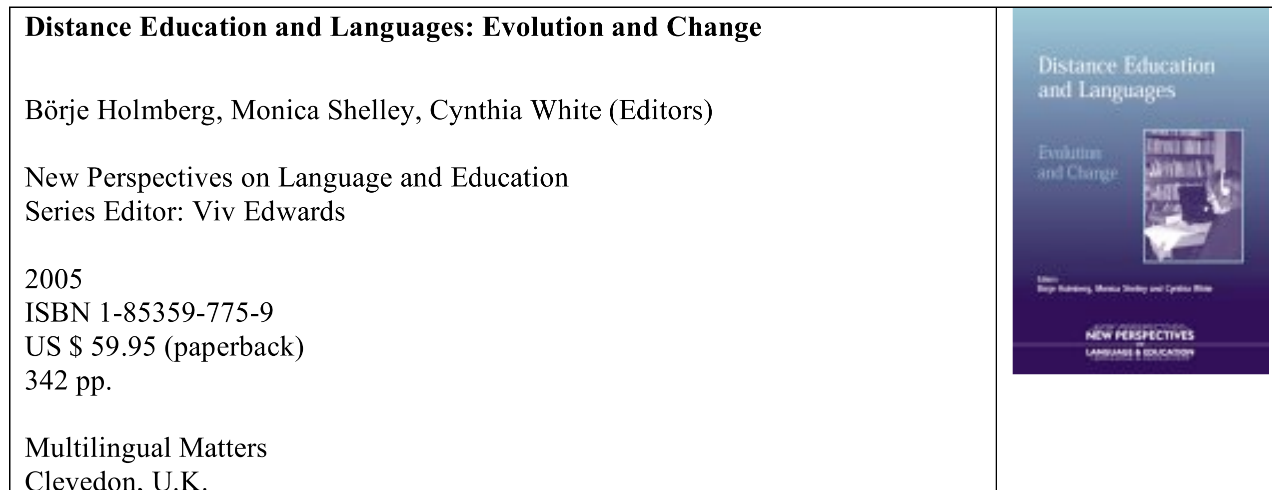
REVIEW OF *DISTANCE EDUCATION AND LANGUAGES: EVOLUTION AND CHANGE*



Distance Education and Languages: Evolution and Change

Börje Holmberg, Monica Shelley, Cynthia White (Editors)

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Multilingual Matters
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If distance education and face-to-face teaching were once clearly distinct modes of university teaching, that is hardly the case today with online and self-directed components integral to most university language courses. The difference is thus one of degree, not one of kind, and the difficulties faced by distance learners – whether isolation, motivation, opportunity for language practice, or integration of feedback – are in effect a magnification of problems faced by all learners.

In addressing these problems, *Distance Education and Languages: Evolution and Change* (hereafter *DEL*) provides insights relevant to all language educators, both in its earlier chapters, which deal with the impact of theoretical developments, and in the later chapters, which provide innovative examples of uses of technology to overcome distance. A third of the eighteen contributed chapters concerns research undertaken at the Open University, the largest provider of distance language education in the United Kingdom. Despite some repetition in course descriptions, most of these chapters provide a thorough discussion of learning issues arising from course design. The other twelve chapters, evenly divided between research from European and non-European universities, provide perspectives on a range of pedagogical contexts in which distance language learning occurs - not only university students enrolled in language or teacher training programs, but language educators and international students seeking extra support.

The book is timely, given the major changes in distance language learning wrought since the 1980s by pedagogical and technological developments. The pioneering work of Vygotsky (1978) on the role of social interaction in learning, Moore on "transactional distance" (1993, p. 22), and Holmberg on distance education as "guided didactic conversation" (1989, p. 43) means that distance learning is now seen as a collaborative rather than a solitary enterprise. Among developments in language pedagogy, the focus on learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991) and the related shift of emphasis from teaching to learning have had the most obvious impact, as the first six chapters testify.

Emblematic of this shift in emphasis is Cynthia White's elaboration of the concept of the "Learner-Context Interface" (Chapter 4), the interface that an individual learner constructs while interacting with the materials, the tutor, the entire learning context, and that shapes his/her learning. Providing a rich

learning environment is thus only part of the equation; the development of a relationship between the learner and the resources is equally important. This relationship is not only cognitive but affective, turning seemingly inert materials into a "personally meaningful" learning experience (*DEL,* p. 63). Establishing this interface is an individual process and will be different for each learner. It involves actively creating a personal environment conducive to learning through engaging with and making adjustments to the resources available. But because distance language learning occurs within the totality of people's lives, "some learners may struggle to establish a viable interface" (*DEL,* p.67).

Although White appears overly concerned with theory as a goal in itself, her work provides a foundation for other chapters. Ros I Solé and Truman (Chapter 5), rather than assuming that providing feedback on progress and correction of errors is sufficient, underline the importance of the learner's reaction and active involvement in the feedback process. Their suggestions for making distance feedback learner-centered include: providing dialogue-based feedback focusing on developing a relationship with the learner (for example in the form of oral recordings); giving feedback in the form of clues enabling the learner to self-correct; the use of self-assessments where possible to encourage reflection. Dreyer, Bangeni and Nel (Chapter 6) examine the widest possible context of learning to determine a framework for providing student support services, whether administrative, academic, or relational. They analyze factors leading to attrition among distance language students at Potchefstroom University in South Africa by constructing a detailed profile (including personal, cognitive, and institutional variables) of both successful and unsuccessful students. They then use this information to prioritize the many types of support that could conceivably be offered and suggest an optimal timing and means for their delivery.

These chapters illustrate the contemporary understanding of learner autonomy as fostered through interaction. But while autonomy is almost universally accepted by researchers as a goal for learners to develop, debate continues as to how it can be achieved. Hurd (Chapter 1) gives a comprehensive overview of issues such as the apparent contradiction between highly structured course materials and autonomy, whether autonomy is an outcome or indeed a pre-requisite of distance learning, and the role of metacognitive awareness in autonomy. Murphy (Chapter 2) takes up the latter in detail, recounting an attempt to develop critical reflection by learners, both on language tasks and on learning strategies, through skills audits and self-assessments. She found that students who undertook these explicit tasks were more able to prioritize goals and learning activities, change their approach to learning, and discuss specific progress made. Ding's project of "collaborative learner autonomy" (Chapter 3) attempts to encourage international students at the University of Nottingham to work together on their English (in peer mentoring, group writing, collective analysis) in a virtual self-access support center. This option has, however, met with a disappointing lack of uptake, due to the academic pressures the international students are under and their disinclination to identify as a group and reveal their weaknesses to each other. Ding's commitment to an "intersubjective" (p. 41) account of autonomy leads him to interpret this as a pedagogical failure. Given their time constraints, however, it is possible that these students are in fact exercising autonomy in prioritizing their learning activities.

With the exception of Holmberg's revisiting of his 1980s research into course design (Chapter 9), the middle sections of *DEL* are concerned with integrating intercultural skills into the language curriculum. Garrido (Chapter 10) discusses the challenge of achieving this goal in distance mode, where the inductive role of teachers in guiding the interpretation of cultural differences must be largely incorporated into materials. She explains how the variety of Spanish-speaking cultures across the world was used to provide culturally diverse world-views and values in a distance Spanish course designed for the Open University.

The 1998 incarnation of the German program at the same university, described by Shelley and Baumann (Chapter 7), seems to have integrated intercultural learning less successfully. The article addresses the topic of "Assessing Intercultural Competence Gain" (*DEL*, p. 119) and refers to the work of Kramsch (eg. 1993, 1995) and Byram (1997) as its theoretical basis. In its methodology, however, the study focuses on

two components of intercultural competence downplayed by these theorists. While Byram (1997) defines intercultural competence in terms of attitudes of openness and curiosity, as well as skills of interpretation, discovery, and interaction, and considers “the ability to identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events” as a major objective (pp. 52-53), the article describes assessing intercultural competence by measuring knowledge (e.g., number of German politicians, hobbies, etc., named) and positive stereotypes (rating on a 5-point scale the degree to which the student considers typical Germans to be arrogant/tidy, etc.) via printed pre- and post-course questionnaires. In their conclusion, the authors recognize that mere exposure to language and cultural information (as in the course described) is inadequate to achieve attitudinal change, and that “more accurate ways of measuring the gain of intercultural competence” need to be found (p. 137).

Chapter 8 by Fay and Davcheva demonstrates a clearer understanding of the multiple dimensions of intercultural learning – cognitive, affective, behavioral – and the need for objectives, learning activities, and assessment to address these coherently. The essay discusses the development of two distance training courses (print plus online) for language professionals in Bulgaria in collaboration with the University of Manchester, and the obstacles encountered, often intercultural themselves and stemming from different cultures of learning in the two countries. The review of the implementation of the first course suggests that despite the pathway through the course from cognitive study to experiential learning to applied practice, there is still a lack of emphasis on the affective aspects of intercultural competence. This is being remedied in the newer course through units constructed specifically around simulations and the targeted use of film materials.

Uses of technology dominate the final third of the book, and once again, considerations of autonomy are foregrounded. Weasenforth, Meloni and Biesenbach-Lucas (Chapter 11) argue that while technology *can* be effective in fostering learner autonomy, this does not occur automatically. Rather, it must be achieved through tasks that train learners in working without supervision, taking on peer teaching and research roles, and integrating various forms of feedback. They discuss a range of ways in which discussion forums, file sharing, and test facilities can be used in order to foster these skills at the same time as developing language acquisition. Hauck and Hampel (Chapter 15) note a shift in the tutor’s role – from source of knowledge to facilitator of learning events – in response to the more active role played by students in an online audio-graphic conferencing environment (Open University’s Lyceum platform, described in more detail below). Poppi, Low and Bondi (Chapter 17) report on a self-access website designed to support primary school foreign language teachers in Europe. These are often generalist teachers who have undergone limited specialist training and may be isolated and lacking confidence. The website (focusing on English and Italian in the first instance with extension to other European languages envisioned) offers resources to improve both their language proficiency and language teaching skills. Each of these articles emphasizes the need for explicit skills training (either through tasks or an online pedagogical advisor) to ensure that all students have sufficient autonomy to take advantage of the resources offered.

Among the chapters focusing on uses of technology, there is a contrast between projects replicating traditional forms of teaching online, and projects using technology more innovatively. For example, while Hansson and Wennö (Chapter 16) are resigned to the impossibility of developing oral skills in distance mode and concentrate instead on online delivery of informational content and training in written language production, several authors report on projects using technology specifically for oral practice online. Milton (Chapter 14), for instance, has developed “Gong”, a discussion forum with a voice-recording feature (as well as the usual text box) that can be used synchronously or asynchronously[1]. Also incorporating voice communication is the Open University’s Lyceum platform, discussed by Hauck and Hampel (Chapter 15), which incorporates “rooms” for synchronous oral exchange, text messaging, and a facility for collaborative writing, all on one screen. Students have expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity for distance oral practice, although tutors indicate that attendance in the optional tutorials is

variable (see Hampel and Hauck (2004) for an account of the problems experienced in the pilot implementation of Lyceum). Meanwhile Tudini (Chapter 12) experiments with synchronous text-based chat to develop oral skills. Being stylistically similar to spoken language, text chat may, she hypothesizes, promote "noticing" of errors in that "learners can read their real-time linguistic production on the screen" (p. 226). While her data shows students engaging in self-repair in text chat, further research is needed to provide evidence that the benefits are transferred to oral competence.

While Schramm demonstrates (Chapter 13) that it is possible to reproduce the communicative features of traditional face-to-face teaching online (lectures and handouts can be posted on web pages; discussions and informal exchanges can take place on bulletin boards or via email), Milton's aim is the opposite: he develops innovative tools to remedy the shortcomings of traditional teaching in the exam-driven Hong Kong context. In addition to "Gong", he has experimented with a "scripting tool" to create animated role plays online: "students manipulate characters on screen, assign them movements and gestures and write dialogue that is synthesized and 'spoken' by the characters" (*DEL,* p. 252). The creative aspect of this facility has motivated students to model challenging encounters surprisingly successfully. His impressive suite of programs also includes an automatic feedback tool prompting students to self-correct[2] and a lexical search tool giving access to multiple uses of a selected expression in context.

Coyle (Chapter 18) describes innovative use of technology on a large scale in the Teaching and Learning Observatory project at the University of Nottingham, which was devised to provide language teacher trainees with school-based experiences not available locally. Expert teachers across the country share their classroom practices through video-conferencing and interactive whiteboards. Thus, a large number of trainees can observe and analyze classes non-intrusively and without traveling. Tutors can also remotely observe lessons taught by trainees, and both can reflect together on the recorded sessions. Coyle discusses the considerable advantages of the system and the constraints, which include ethical and technical issues.

Coyle's chapter brings to a close a volume that has much to offer language teachers wanting to ensure that the online tasks they set are designed and scaffolded appropriately. The book is marred by some unevenness in the quality of the papers, with a few chapters clearly lagging behind their neighbors in awareness of contemporary developments, whether in pedagogy or in uses of technology. Overall, however, the collection provides a much needed focus on language learning not based on an assumption of regular co-presence of teachers and learners. Most of the essays offer a clear picture of current thinking in the field and are immediately useful for teachers seeking to maximize the value of face-to-face classes by enabling students to undertake self-regulated and pedagogically useful online tasks productively.

NOTES

1. This forum is available at http://www.cs.ust.hk/gong.

2. A similar tool has been developed for learners of French by Nadasdi and Sinclair (University of Edmonton). See Le Patron at http://lepatron.tapor.ualberta.ca.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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