Language Learning in Distance Education

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1 The idea of distance language learning

1.1 Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an enormous expansion in distance language learning opportunities. Rapid developments in information and communications technology, together with societal changes, have increased awareness of and demand for distance education – and now also for online learning, and distributed learning (see section 2.3), to name but two of the more recent incarnations which I will look at in this book. Other forces have contributed to expansion, such as the current growing demand for global education offerings, and the desire on the part of many institutions to reach new audiences or to retain their market share. All this means that distance learning opportunities are becoming an increasingly visible part of educational provision.

Many language learners, language teachers and institutions are coming to distance education for the first time. However, distance language learning is not a new phenomenon. What makes it appear so is the development and wide availability of the new technologies for connecting learners and teachers, the rapid pace at which these have developed, and the widespread publicity they have attracted. More traditional forms of distance language learning, that used print, audio and video materials are being supplemented by opportunities for interaction and collaboration online. The social and technological changes that prompted expansion are also transforming the nature of distance learning. They have resulted in new contexts for learning, new ways of learning and new roles and responsibilities for participants.

There is now broad interest in innovation in distance language learning, both from distance language professionals, and from others who are interested in the possibilities offered by online learning environments. A number of factors have invited new providers to enter the field: a belief in the accessibility and convenience of online technologies, the need to be in the front line of progress, and a perception that distance teaching is time- and cost-effective. A web search on the International Distance

Learning Course Finder showed that more than 1,300 language courses were registered – out of a total of 55,000 distance courses from 130 countries. And the number of providers entering the market to provide online or distance courses for language learners is growing.

While distance education has achieved a new prominence, much about the processes involved and the participants remains little understood. The new technologies provide institutions with access to new audiences, but bring with them relatively little information about these audiences in order to inform their practices. Important aspects of the learning experience are transformed in the distance context, but whereas the tendency has been to focus on technology as the defining feature, experienced distance educators and commentators argue repeatedly that technology *per se* is not as important as other factors such as learner motivation, an understanding of the distance language learning context and of the demands it places on participants, the responsiveness of the teacher, the accessibility of the learning context, and the overall context of delivery.

This chapter introduces the idea of distance language learning in all its diversity. Examples of different contexts for distance language learning are explored, and the ways in which they vary. I then examine the meaning of distance, its relationship to time and place and to learning opportunities. A brief discussion of definitions of distance education and distance learning is used to highlight the difference between a focus on structural considerations as a starting point for understanding distance language learning, as opposed to pedagogical concerns. A brief overview of different generations of distance learning opportunities is given, all of which continue to contribute to current practice. From here I return to an overview of the landscape of distance language learning, and to the particular challenges it presents for learners.

1.2 Distance language courses

The nature of opportunities for distance language learning are diverse and still evolving. Distance language programmes include a wide range of elements and practices ranging from traditional print-based correspondence courses, to courses delivered entirely online with extensive opportunities for interaction, feedback and support between teachers and learners, and among the learners themselves. Here I introduce four distance language courses, which differ in quite distinct ways in terms of how learning environments are designed, the different emphases and concerns within those courses and the issues that arise in course development and delivery. The overview aims to give some sense of the ways

in which distance language learning opportunities are inflected in different contexts.

1.2.1 A technology-based course in intermediate Spanish

Rogers and Wolff (2000) report on the development of a distance language programme at the Pennsylvania State University that offers a distance course for intermediate Spanish, developed to meet the growing demand for Spanish instruction. The course is built around a combination of hi-tech and low-tech options. Initial plans were to use a technology package that came complete with a textbook, but a number of compatibility issues emerged. It was then necessary for the course design team to develop their own technology-based support system consisting of:

- e-mail – for asynchronous writing activities;
- chat room – for real-time communication exercises;
- computer-aided grammar practice;
- web-based cultural expansion modules, emphasising reading Spanish.

A principle Rogers and Wolff (p. 47) used in deciding on the kinds of technologies they would use was that 'less is best':

> realising that, with each additional computer-based activity introduced into the curriculum, we were substantially raising the complexity of the course, the probability for technology-based frustrations, and the possibility of instructional failure.

More hi-tech elements were combined with a conventional cassette-tape-and-workbook approach to build listening comprehension skills. Rogers and Wolff acknowledge that in the end they decided to de-emphasise spoken Spanish, because options such as Internet-based audioconferencing were not sufficiently reliable or well-developed to meet the benchmarks they had established for providing quality learning experiences. Of course had the technology met their benchmarks there would still be a host of additional challenges for teachers and learners in learning to work within and derive benefit from what would be a new learning environment.

Rogers and Wolff were also cautious in the way they piloted the course: given that this was a very new undertaking for staff and students, they decided to try it out with a group of students resident at Penn State, so they could change to face-to-face classes if they encountered unexpected difficulties. The lessons they learned from the pilot study were that developing and implementing a distance language learning course requires a substantial commitment of time, energy and money, that

technology fails – often when least expected – and the diverse capabilities and shortcomings of students' own computers provided significant limitations on the way and extent to which they participated in the activities. In addition, Rogers and Wolff (p. 51) note that:

> The already steep learning curve inherent in studying a second language became significantly steeper with each new technology that students had to master in order to complete their assignments. In turn, this added pressure increased the probability for learner frustration and failure.

Among the more positive findings were that students, administrators and even future employers expect that available technologies should be part of the delivery of high-quality learning experiences, and they had gone some way to meet the challenge. The team approach they used in developing the course and carrying out the pilot study was rewarding, and also effective 'in anticipating and resolving problems, and . . . it assured the variety of perspectives necessary to create a positive learning experience for both the instructors and the students' (p. 52). Learning to work within a team-based approach is a requirement in most distance language courses, and this, together with the scale of detailed planning required in advance of course delivery, are important areas of adjustment for language teachers new to the distance mode. Based on their experience Rogers and Wolff see the greatest challenges in distance language learning as reduced opportunity for cohort-based learning and immediate, personalised feedback.

1.2.2 A multimode course in thesis writing for graduate students

David Catterick (2001) describes a Writing Up Research course for international graduate students offered by the University of Dundee, Scotland. The course itself lasted six weeks and was multimode: half accessed in face-to-face classes, half via WebCT. WebCT stands for Worldwide Web Course Tools and is software designed for the delivery of distance learning courses, which can be used to create a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). When the course had been taught as fully classroom-based, scheduling difficulties faced by students from different departments across the university presented ongoing problems. The development of an online learning environment, accessible 24 hours a day, was seen as a viable solution.

The course's first week was classroom-based: the seven students met with the teacher and learned how to use WebCT. The face-to-face orientation was very helpful in enabling students to access and work within the online environment, with the teacher on hand to help with any initial

difficulties. Face-to-face meetings at the start of distance courses have been found to be important for motivation, developing a sense of learning community, and in easing access to initial learning events. However, the constraints of time and distance mean that this is not possible in many contexts.

In the Writing Up Research course students accessed materials and completed online tasks early each week using WebCT. They were then required to log on for about an hour – in the university computing labs, in their workplace or from home – on a set afternoon to take part in online discussions. These were based around questions posed earlier in the week and were designed to mirror classroom-based discussions. The text messages could be read by other students who were in the chat room, and the software kept a record of the entire discussion.

The lessons learned included that considerable time and support were required to set up and operate an online course. The response of students to the course was mixed: some appreciated their experience using WebCT, while others preferred 'more class-based teaching'. Overall the evaluations of the course were very positive in terms of its usefulness and effectiveness. In conclusion Catterick notes that the text-based nature of WebCT was appropriate for a writing course, but may be less suitable for other English language courses. In addition language proficiency is an important consideration. Based on his experience Catterick argues that learners with less well-developed communicative ability than those in his study – who were described as being high-intermediate language learners – may lack confidence in their communication skills, and therefore be intimidated by the chat function. Issues relating to interaction and participation in online learning events are discussed further in Chapter 3.

1.2.3 A pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course

Distance language courses are sometimes developed for a small, but significant niche market, and Boyle (1994, 1995) presents a valuable description of a distance learning course as a pre-sessional component in an EAP project. The audience were postgraduate students enrolled in an English-medium school of engineering at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Thailand. Few staff at AIT are native speakers of English, and 'since students are unfamiliar with the range of idiolects to which they are exposed, many have considerable difficulty in following lectures' (Boyle 1994: 115). While assistance was available for students having difficulty with English when they were studying at AIT, attendance was often difficult because of competing demands from other coursework. In addition, it was not feasible for all students to attend a

face-to-face pre-sessional course. Thus a distance course was developed to meet the needs of students. The course had two aims:

- to prepare students for initial course work by sending them recordings of talks and lectures by their future teachers, and by dispatching readings and other materials to aid in this preparation;
- to use the cassette tapes and correspondence to build up a relationship with the students so that they will be prepared to seek the help of language teachers when they arrive at the institution.

(Boyle 1995)

The course was found to be successful in terms of the second aim. The main difficulty in fulfilling the first aim related to a common theme in distance education, namely the demands of course development. Boyle (1994) underestimated the amount of time required for preparation and for managing the production and dissemination of materials. This meant the scope and quality of the work had to be reduced and fell below his expectations. None the less, the initiative by Boyle underscores the role for a distance learning course as a preliminary to further study in English, in response to the evident language needs of students. The Boyle study also represents an early example of the way distance learning contexts can be used to complement or converge with conventional face-to-face education.

1.2.4 A vocational French language course delivered by satellite

Laouénan and Stacey (1999) describe a pilot study into delivering a distance vocational French language course developed as part of a European Union-funded project called RATIO (Rural Area Training and Information Opportunities). The course was developed and delivered by the University of Plymouth to a number of small businesses with an interest in advanced French, focusing on current topics such as politics and innovation in France. It consisted of satellite broadcasts followed by videoconferencing sessions. Materials were sent to learners in advance of the satellite broadcasts, and included an introduction to the programme, additional explanations, reading material and question sheets for listening work. The videoconferencing follow-up sessions were planned around a series of interactive exercises built on the material presented during the satellite broadcasts.

Laouénan and Stacey note that a number of software problems and problems with the link-up between centres prevented the sessions taking place as planned. In addition, 'the delay which occurred between speech and reception made communication difficult, which in a foreign language session is a very serious drawback' (p. 179). Laouénan and Stacey

conclude that the potential of the videoconferencing software is considerable, but it proved to be far more complex to use than they had anticipated, and suggest that it is essential to have a technician to hand, at least in the initial stages. The resources required for this type of distance learning are considerable, in terms of both time and costs, and Laouénan and Stacey emphasise that larger numbers of learners would be required to make it worthwhile and cost-effective on a continuing basis.

The course is an example of just-in-time distance learning that is developed for a particular group with specific needs at relatively short notice. It also had a vocational orientation, and as such can be seen as part of the move towards using distance education to deliver opportunities for learning in the workplace. A further feature of the course is that it was group based, i.e., learners came together at a particular time and place to access the classes. There were individual learning opportunities in the materials sent out beforehand, but the main part of the course was based around learning as a group. Laouénan and Stacey describe their work as 'a brief experiment in the distance teaching and learning of French'. As such it reflects much of the published research in distance language learning, which is based on short trials rather than on the provision of distance programmes that have been developed, modified and delivered to groups of learners on an ongoing basis. Research in both types of contexts can contribute to our understanding of distance language learning, but it is important to acknowledge that many of the realities and challenges in providing distance learning opportunities can be understood and addressed more fully in more long-term contexts.

Distance learning opportunities are offered within a range of cultural, educational and institutional settings, each with their own influences, which means that the terms *distance learning* and *distance education* can be applied to language learning programmes with markedly different features. It is possible, however, to identify some common contexts for distance language learning, along the spectrum from individual-based to group-based learning opportunities. These are represented in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 is meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive in terms of the range of distance language learning contexts. It introduces a number of important dimensions along which distance language learning opportunities vary, including the range of media used, opportunities for interaction, sources of support and individual vs group-based learning. While the distinction between individual- and group-based systems is important, developments in technology have made it possible to combine individual and collaborative learning opportunities. What Figure 1.1 does not show is that many of the most important components of distance language learning deal with people and processes, i.e., the

Individual-based   Group-based

| Traditional correspondence course | Print-based course with electronic support systems | Multiple-media course combining synchronous and asynchronous media | Real-time e-chat, audio-conferencing via VLE, text-based materials sent electronically or by post | Language classes delivered by satellite to multiple sites |
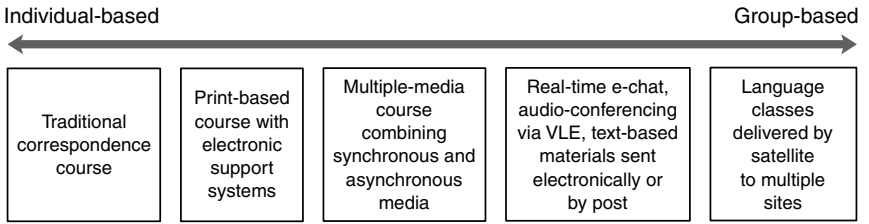
Figure 1.1 A spectrum of distance language learning contexts

participants and the means by which effective learning experiences are established on an individual basis within the distance context. This will be an important focus of much of the book.

1.3 Distance, place and time

The traditional model of education is that learning and teaching take place in close proximity, at a particular point in time. However, in distance education the focal point of learning is no longer the classroom but has shifted to the home, or the workplace, or a study context. Learning may take place according to each learner's schedule and in different time zones, or it may take place at set times. Distance can be seen in relation to the two dimensions of time and place. Figure 1.2 shows how particular combinations of time and place relate to different types of learning contexts.

Distance language courses may make use of the same place dimension in face-to-face tutorials or summer schools and through access to regional study centres. Most distance language learning, however, takes place in the different place dimension. It offers possibilities for synchronous learning, when opportunities are fixed at a point in time, and asynchronous learning, which can be accessed at any time.

	Same time	Different time
Same place	ST-SP (classroom teaching, face-to-face tutorials, workshops)	DT-SP (learning centre/ self-access centre)
Different place	ST-DP (synchronous distance learning)	DT-DP (asynchronous distance learning)

Figure 1.2 Combinations of time and place in learning contexts

1.3.1 Asynchronous learning

Asynchronous distance language learning involves learning opportunities that can be accessed at any time, and which make use of, for example, print, video, CD-ROM, e-mail and computer conference discussions. The advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has provided a range of possibilities for asynchronous communication, through e-mail, discussion lists, computer conferencing and bulletin boards. In distance language courses that make use of CMC, new opportunities for interaction with the teacher and with other learners counter the traditional and awkward isolation of distance language learners. CMC has also opened up possibilities for interacting with native speakers in tandem learning opportunities (see section 7.6). The advantage of asynchronous interaction is that learners can participate and respond at their convenience, there is time for thought and reflection between responses, and it is possible to revisit discussions at a later date. Lamy and Goodfellow (1999a: 45), referring to the Open University's Centre for Modern Languages, argue that:

> For the Open University's adult distance learners, the form of CMC which has so far proved the most accessible and appropriate to their varied circumstances of home-based learning is the asynchronous bulletin board system, or text-based computer conference . . . Typical of the kinds of interaction generated around these systems is a kind of 'slow motion' conversation in which messages and their responses may be separated by several days.

Asynchronous delivery offers flexibility to learners in that access to the course content or communication can take place at any time, and from different places. Voice mail, for example, has been used in language courses to provide students with listening and speaking practice. Rio Salado College in Arizona offers a distance Spanish course, and as part of this students call up the voice-mail 'kiosk' at least once a week. What they hear is a brief lesson, which prompts them to answer questions, using Spanish, about the lessons scheduled for the week. The responses of the students are recorded, and sent to the instructor's voice-mail box (Young 2000). Asynchronous systems have a number of other practical advantages, in that they are generally cost-effective for the institution and for the individual, and they are not confined to particular schedules or time zones.

1.3.2 Synchronous learning

Synchronous distance language learning uses technologies that allow for communication in 'realtime', for example by telephone or chat rooms.

The time and opportunity for learners to participate is controlled, which means of course that it is a less flexible option. Synchronous systems can be highly motivating in that distance learners feel less isolated and gain energy and inspiration from the learning group. Mason (1998a: 31) notes that this can be further enhanced by the fact that 'real-time interaction with its opportunity to convey tone and nuance helps to develop group cohesion and the sense of being part of a learning community'. Thus synchronous interactions may feel more like a live conversation, and are more spontaneous. Feedback plays a very important role in distance language learning, and synchronous systems permit immediate feedback by the teacher, as well as providing opportunities for the development of feedback within the learning group. One of the key challenges in distance language learning is the development of interactive competence, particularly in realtime, and synchronous learning opportunities are important for this (see section 3.2).

However, not all learners respond equally well to the loss of flexibility that is part of synchronous distance learning. While some learners prefer the structure provided by the regular timing of synchronous delivery – to have the course delivered in regular sessions at fixed times and to have their learning paced in this way – others find it a very real limitation.

1.3.3 Multi-synchronous learning

Many distance education providers now combine synchronous and asynchronous forms of delivery in order to bring together the benefits of both forms of provision. The term *multi-synchronous* is used by Mason (1998b) to refer to the combination of both synchronous and asynchronous media with the aim of capitalising on the advantages of both systems.

This is the most common way in which different media are used in distance language learning – to work together in a complementary fashion. One example is a satellite television Internet-based distance language programme called English Business Communication developed by Christine Uber Grosse (2001). The course brought together the following elements:

- interactive satellite television linking remote classes (synchronous);
- Internet-based web board for holding chats during office hours (synchronous), for posting and reviewing homework and for class announcements (asynchronous);
- e-mail for sending messages, homework and feedback on submitted work (asynchronous);
- face-to-face meetings held at the start of the course as part of an orientation week (synchronous).

One of the interesting and under-researched areas of distance language learning relates to the kinds of adjustments that occur as a course evolves with new groups of students, usually in response to the experiences of participants, pedagogical developments, and further refinements in technology. These often include fundamental decisions about the balance between synchronous vs asynchronous learning opportunities.

1.4 Definitions

There is no one definition of distance education. In fact there is no one term to define as the term *distance learning* is also well accepted and widely used. Distance education and distance learning are often used as synonyms or near synonyms in the field. In the European context, distance learning is generally perceived to be a more learner-centered term, and is also used here.

The series of definitions below indicate the range of approaches which have been used in defining these two key terms in the field, all of which emphasise distance – in space and/or time – between teacher and learner.

> The term *distance learning* and/or *distance education* refers to the teaching-learning arrangement in which the learner and teacher are separated by geography and time. (Williams, Paprock and Covington 1999: 2)

> *Distance education* is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. (Moore and Kearsley 1996: 2)

> *Distance learning* is an educational system in which learners can study in a flexible manner in their own time, at the pace of their choice and without requiring face-to-face contact with a teacher. (Shelley 2000: 651)

> *Distance education* implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occurs non-contiguously. Distance education must involve two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication. (Garrison and Archer 2000: 175)

Background

There are several starting points for a definition of distance education; most begin with structural concerns, a few begin with pedagogical concerns, and fewer still begin with learner-based perspectives of the meaning of distance learning. When distance education is approached from the point of view of organisational or structural concerns, definitions generally include the following components, based on the work of Keegan (1990):

- *The separation of teacher and learner* in time and/or place.
- *The influence of an educational organisation* in preparing and delivering materials and in providing support services. This distinguishes distance learning from private study contexts, and learning using open courseware.
- *The use of a range of media* including print, audio, video, and computer-based applications to carry content.
- *The use of communication devices* to facilitate two-way communication. Providing opportunities for interaction is an important challenge, and these are increasingly viewed as integral to distance learning experiences.
- *The possibility of face-to-face contact* usually in the form of tutorials, regional courses, summer schools, and self-help groups. Face-to-face contact serves the function of providing motivation, social contact, group cohesion, and opportunities for support. In some language courses attendance may be mandatory.
- *The provision of a range of support services*, including what is given by the teacher, relating to wider aspects of study and the role of the distance learner. This may include opportunities for interaction and response to individual learners as well as guides such as the Open University UK Toolkit Series produced by Student Services to support distance study.

Richards and Roe (1994), in an introduction to distance learning in ELT, argue that a simple and deceptive conceptual trap in distance learning is to assume that it is the individual learner who is distant, or remote, from the centre of things. They offer the view that it is in fact the teacher who is remote from where the learning takes place. This perspective is important, and is implicit in the theoretical framework of distance language learning developed in Chapter 4.

An alternative approach to defining distance education comes when pedagogical concerns are taken as the starting point, at which point a different set of distinctive characteristics can be identified. According to Peters (1998) these include the extent to which 'written' teaching dominates in contrast to 'spoken' teaching; and so learning by 'reading' is stressed rather than learning through 'listening'. This has important
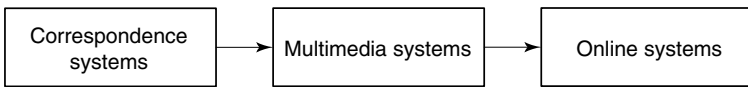
implications for the development of oral and aural skills and interactive competence in distance language learning. In distance learning, pedagogic structures are formed using a range of technical and electronic media and different generations of provision can be identified. The way in which different pedagogical structures – such as those using CMC or Internet audioconferencing – impact on the development of target language (TL) skills is an important, and relatively unexplored, area for research in distance language learning. And the situation in which distance language learning takes place is quite different, in decisive ways, from that of learners in face-to-face settings. The impact of individual learning sites on the learning process has only been recognised more recently. A further point is that specific institutional and organisational conditions are required to provide and develop learning opportunities.

When learner perspectives are considered, the defining characteristics of distance language learning may be found to be markedly different from the perspectives adopted by researchers and theorists. The way in which language learners frame the process of distance learning is the major theme of Chapter 4, the learner–context interface.

1.5 Generations

In the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, century developments in technology have led to many new forms of distance learning (see Table 1.1).

Distance education can be seen as having evolved through a number of successive waves or generations, in response to developments in technology.

Correspondence systems → Multimedia systems → Online systems

Rumble (2001) favours a four-generational model:

Correspondence education → Educational broadcasting → Multimedia approaches → E-education approaches
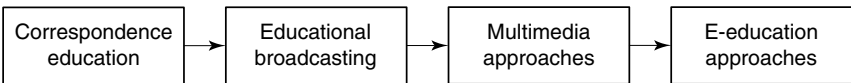
Successive generations have offered the potential for a progressive increase in learner control, opportunities for interaction, and in possibilities for learner choice. More recent models of distance language learning also offer a wider range of opportunities to communicate in the TL, with new possibilities for feedback and learner support. They also raise a number of problematic issues as practitioners attempt to integrate them into distance learning opportunities and these are discussed in later chapters. Here I discuss developments in terms of three generations.

Table 1.1. *Developments in technology available for language learning in distance education*

1940s	Educational radio
1950s	16mm film
1960s	Broadcast television (live and pre-taped)
1970s	Audiocassettes
1980s	Live satellite delivery (one-way video, two-way audio) Video compression (two-way video/face-to-face) Videocassettes
1990s	Computer-based education (asynchronous) Interactive multimedia Multimedia conferencing CD-ROM The Internet The WWW Web-based video, audio, multimedia
2000–	Broadband technology Wireless access

1.5.1 First generation course models

In the *first generation* distance educators used print to carry the educational content to the learners. Interaction between teacher and learners was 'one-way' – usually by post – with a time lag between mailing and response. This print-based model of correspondence learning was the predominant mode of delivery up to the 1960s. Few distance language courses were offered at this stage since it was felt that the context did not support opportunities to develop skills in speaking and listening.

1.5.2 Second generation course models

The impetus for the *second generation* course model came with the incorporation of television into the distance learning environment to supplement print-based sources. The establishment of the Open University UK in 1969 was the first time that a range of media had been used for distance education, even though the dominant medium was still print. In some contexts the telephone was also used to link either individual learners, or remote classrooms, with the teacher. It was at this point that the offering of language courses through the distance mode became a more feasible undertaking: first audiocassettes, and then videocassettes became

important components in courses. The second generation is usually characterised as an approach to distance education in which print is combined with broadcast media and cassettes.

1.5.3 Third generation course models

The *third generation* of distance education uses information and communications technology as its basis, and it is these developments which have made interactive distance language learning possible. An early example was a Spanish course offered by Syracuse Language Systems which combined some of the features of third generation distance learning with computer-assisted language learning (Rothenberg 1998). Students used a CD-ROM 'multimedia textbook' supplemented by access to World Wide Web resources. They communicated with the instructors and native speakers via e-mail.

The continuing debate about what constitutes third generation distance education has emphasised the importance of the distinction between technology for distribution purposes and its uses for an interactive exchange between the teacher and learners and between the learners themselves (see Figure 1.3). This distinction is important since an ongoing concern for distance language teachers has been how to improve interactive opportunities for learners, whereas requirements relating to distribution have been met fairly satisfactorily by existing course models.

The opportunities for interaction offered by the emergence of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are central to the third generation model of distance language learning. The hallmark of this model is greater and enhanced communication opportunities between the teacher and learners, and between the learners themselves, either individually or in groups. Within distance language learning a number of third generation course models have been trialled, either as separate from or in conjunction with existing course models. An important body of research comes from the FLUENT Project (Framework for Language Use in Environments embedded in New Technologies) developed by the Open University UK. The project aims to support learners in their development

Distribution	**Interaction**
↓	↓
broadcasts	e-mail
World Wide Web	computer conferencing
	audio-conferencing

Figure 1.3 Examples of use of technology for distribution vs interaction

of oral and aural competence (Kötter 2001), and involves the development of a virtual learning environment for learners of French and German. The environment is based on voice-over Internet conferencing (where Internet voice technology allows students to communicate verbally in realtime), e-mail and a dedicated project website which is updated weekly (Shield, Hauck and Kötter 2000). Kötter (2001) identifies a number of issues that need further research before the virtual learning environment can be used in mainstream distance language course provision. These will be discussed in later chapters and include:

- the optimal use of tutors' and students' time;
- addressing drop-out relating to technical problems;
- error correction and feedback;
- support for less advanced learners.

All three generations remain in use in different forms of provision around the world. In practice, elements of all three generations are often combined, even within courses which are delivered predominantly online.

1.6 The landscape

An understanding of the landscape of distance language learning can be gained by reviewing commentaries within the field and by looking at providers who have contributed to the development of research and practice in the international context. Both these approaches are taken here.

1.6.1 Perspectives

In 2000 *TESOL Quarterly* published a special issue on TESOL in the twenty-first century. Included in that collection were articles on changes in the global economy and English language teaching (Warschauer 2000) and on the language of computer-mediated communication (Murray 2000). Both included a section devoted to discussion of distance education, and the perspectives they present on key features of the landscape of distance language learning are reviewed here.

Warschauer (2000) places analysis of distance education within a wider discussion of new information technologies in English language teaching. He sees the growth in distance learning opportunities as part of the desire to reach new markets, which in turn is related to the commercialisation of higher education. Of concern is that the expansion of learning opportunities may be motivated by a desire to achieve economies of scale. Warschauer (2000) and Warschauer, Shetzer and Meloni (2000) suggest a number of potential dangers in these developments:

- high quality distance learning opportunities require significant amounts of personal interaction which are expensive to set up and maintain;
- providers may be under pressure to reduce teacher–student interaction, which requires significant resources, and to place more emphasis on individual access to pre-packaged materials;
- administrators may seek intellectual property rights for materials and courses produced by teachers to reuse them in distance programmes;
- as the development of distance programmes may be separated from the delivery of learning opportunities, staff may be employed on part-time, temporary contracts which can have long-term effects on their professional status and standing.

Warschauer (2000: 527) sees distance education as a realm in which the role of technology will be a 'site of struggle' in increasing or lowering the quality of learning opportunities, which could also bring to a head issues about the professional standing of educators within the field of distance learning. The way in which distance language learning will develop remains very much an open question. Warschauer *et al.* (2000: 76) comment that in theory the power of computers and the Internet can allow distance education programmes to be more flexible, interactive and fast-paced, but whether this will prove to be true in practice remains to be seen.

Murray (2000) takes a slightly different perspective in her overview of distance education, beginning with a description of the historical context in which distance learning and teaching evolved. The status of distance education has changed dramatically from what Murray (p. 414) calls the 'traditional stepchild of most educational systems' to become the focus of popular attention in the past two decades. This shift in the positioning of distance education is accompanied by the development of new audiences for distance learning, who are keen to take advantage of the flexibility which comes from the anytime, anywhere functionality of computer-based distance learning. A concern associated with this is that the expanded educational opportunities may not in fact reach the many audiences who do not have access to computers. Murray (p. 415) raises questions about the value of CMC in distance learning and argues that there is little research 'that critically examines either the effectiveness of instruction or the nature of human communication via CMC'. Much has been written about the promise and peril of virtual universities, but little attention has been paid to how learners engage in asynchronous CMC in distance language learning. This question is particularly important because of the significant amount of research in second language teaching devoted to the ways in which teacher–student and student–student

interaction facilitates language acquisition. Murray argues that research and discussion on CMC in distance language learning should focus on the outcomes of interaction, rather than on the technology itself.

A scan of the landscape also reveals the diversity in the practice of distance language learning on different continents. In the last decade research and documented accounts of distance language learning opportunities have come from Italy (Cusinato 1996), Finland (Tammelin 1997, 1998, 1999), Thailand (Vanijdee 2001, 2003), Korea (Dickey 2001), Hong Kong (Hyland 2001; Leung 1999), Australia (Möllering 2000) and New Zealand (White 1997, 2000; Garing 2002). Some of these accounts relate to small-scale trials with fewer than ten students; others concern large-scale programmes that have evolved over many years with up to 5,000 learners in a single course. Here I focus on just two providers of distance language learning programmes: the Open University UK, and the Adult Migrant English Program, Australia – both of which have developed a significant body of research and contributed to practice and theory-building within the field.

1.6.2 Providers

The Open University UK

The Open University UK is one of the largest providers of distance language learning opportunities in the world. Each year approximately 8,000 language learners located in the UK and mainland Europe enrol in the distance courses which are offered in French, Spanish and German. It is interesting that while the OUUK has been established for over 30 years it was only in 1995 that the first language course – in French – was offered. The relatively late entry into distance language learning and teaching meant that course developers and tutors were able to draw on the expertise and quality practices which had been developed within the OUUK for course delivery and learner support. The model of distance learning for language learners at the OUUK includes some of the features of traditional methods of delivery; learners are provided with course books, video and audio documentaries, audio activity cassettes, and transcripts of video- and audiocassettes. In addition they are entitled to up to 21 hours of face-to-face tuition at study centres, and students of second- and third-level courses are expected to attend a one-week summer school (Kötter 2001).

The OUUK has been concerned to find ways to improve the learning opportunities which can be made available to distance language learners, and has established a number of important research directions. One of the ongoing issues is that while materials are comprehensive, the

amount of synchronous interaction in which learners can participate is very low. Since the delivery of the first French course there have been a number of investigations into opportunities for students to develop their interactive spoken and written competences in home-based environments. Pilot studies include telephone-based audioconferencing, Internet-based audioconferencing, synchronous text chat and audiographics. Shield (2000) observes that the importance learners place on being able to communicate with others on the same course and to participate in events that allow them to share their experiences with other distance learners has been evident in the pilot studies. She adds that the aim is to use ICT to provide learners with a forum in which they can socialise with other learners and overcome a sense of isolation, and also participate in learning activities which allow them to use previously learned vocabulary and structures. The challenge is to match these new learning opportunities with the needs, dispositions and resources of learners who enter distance language courses. A further challenge is to integrate them successfully with established forms of provision.

Other areas of research developed by the Department of Modern Languages at the OUUK include learner autonomy (e.g. Hurd, Beaven and Ortega 2001), changing roles of teachers and learners in online environments (Hauck and Haezewindt 1999), and the development of reflective interaction in online environments (e.g. Lamy and Goodfellow, 1999a, 1999b; Lamy and Hassan 2003). In the writings on distance language learning from the OUUK, the need to find further ways of supporting home-based language learners and developing opportunities for critical reflection and learner–learner interaction are very much to the fore. This overview has been relatively short since I make quite detailed reference to the OUUK distance language learning context in later chapters.

Reflections and experiences

Distance learners of languages at the OUUK

Monica Shelley is a Germanist who has been involved in distance education at the Open University in the UK for nearly twenty-five years. She worked on the production of language courses when the programme began at the OU some years ago. She now works in the Institute of Educational Technology at the OU, and carries out surveys of students on the different language courses.

'What have you learned from your interactions with students about the realities of a distance context for language learning?'

Background

Students of languages at the Open University, who are all adults, are generally well motivated and enjoy their courses. For the majority, study at a distance is the only option, often because they are working full or part time, because of lack of local resources or their domestic situation. While this is particularly problematic where learning to communicate a language is concerned – and many often complain about the lack of opportunities for conversation – there are positive aspects such as the flexibility of time and pace possible when studying on one's own, and the availability of high-quality, up-to-date materials and technologies to support learning. Students' contact with the university is based on the course materials provided and feedback on their assignments, plus the opportunity to attend tutorials from time to time, and (in some cases) residential schools. A recent development is the availability of an online tuition system using synchronous voice-over-Internet conferencing and visual workspace tools. Distance learners of languages at the OU bring a wide range of skills and experience to their language study. They often know far more about the country and culture of the target language than school-age or mainstream university students, and have, in many cases, developed language learning skills on the basis of school learning or life experience.

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The Adult Migrant English Program, Australia

The issue of access to English language classes for adult migrant learners within Australia was the catalyst for the development of It's Over To You, a distance language course based thematically around topics relevant to migrant settlement. The course has been offered in various formats since the 1980s and is an important option for adults within the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). It aims to ensure that students who cannot attend face-to-face classes – either because of geographical distance, family and work commitments, or cultural factors – do not miss out on opportunities to develop language skills as part of the settlement process. As part of this, emphasis has been placed on the need for distance programmes to provide efficient communication between the teacher and learners, between learners and the TL community and, ideally, opportunities for contact between learners.

Much of the emphasis in the distance AMEP programme is on encouraging learners to interact in the host society, and reflects a task-based and learner-centred approach to language learning. It aims to create