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# Language Learning in Distance Education

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To Bruce, Caroline and Rebecca

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Cynthia White

## Introduction

This is a book about distance language learning. It aims to provide an overview of the field and takes a learner-centred approach to examining key issues within distance language contexts. The book has been written at a time of rapid change: opportunities for distance language learning are expanding around the world, and are attracting the attention of the public, policy makers and new providers. Language learners and language teachers have sensed the convenience and potential of the new learning environments in terms of improved access to and delivery of language learning experiences. While distance language learning creates an array of new advantages, it also places new demands on participants: to acquire new roles, and develop new skills. In spite of the growing presence of distance learning opportunities, and the eagerness to participate in these opportunities, the field of distance language learning remains little known and little understood. It is often narrowly conceptualised as the development of technology-mediated language learning opportunities. Many of the key issues for distance language learning, however, relate to human factors which are common to both hi-tech and low-tech environments – factors that arise as learners attempt to establish and maintain an effective means of working within a distance learning context. The central argument developed here is that in order to understand language learning in distance education, it is crucial to maintain a focus on those who are most involved, the actual learners, and to explore the ways they respond to the demands and opportunities it presents.

### Background and purpose

This book is oriented towards developing an awareness and understanding of distance language learning by thinking about learners within the kinds of environments which can be developed through the distance mode. This is not a typical approach. The research literature on distance education has tended to view the subject predominantly from the perspective of providers and to focus on the concerns of institutions. Much

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of what has been written to date on distance education has related to course provision and the development of learning opportunities, with relatively little attention being paid to language learners, and their response to distance learning contexts. There is a need for a more learner-centred approach within the field to gain an understanding of fundamental issues in distance language learning, and to move away from a preoccupation with the development of courseware as the core or single most important component in providing distance learning opportunities. This angle injects some reality into the teaching–learning process. The sense of control over learning which language teachers may develop in the course of constructing new learning spaces or developing courseware does not take sufficient account of the independent decisions learners make over what will form part of their learning experiences. Course development aspects are important but are considered here as one part of the broader distance learning context, and in relation to the experience and perspectives of learners.

This book offers an examination of elements, processes, issues and challenges within distance language learning, with the experience of learners as the common thread. It is not primarily about the use of technology and the process of innovation in distance language contexts; these issues are discussed but they provide a relatively narrow approach to understanding distance language learning. It seeks to present the advantages, strengths and affordances of distance language learning opportunities alongside its constraints, weaknesses and limitations. Developments in technology have overtaken our understanding of the concerns and issues they raise within distance language learning and teaching environments. In my view the task of making sense of new environments is best guided by an appreciation of distance learning as a unique context which is influenced by a range of factors that are not always immediately apparent or readily discernible to teachers or learners. Many of these concern human and pragmatic factors common to both hi-tech and low-tech distance learning environments.

In writing this book I was always aware of the rate of change and innovation within the field, and also of how short-lived many new courses are. For this reason I have not included many online references, and have avoided screen dumps of current web pages. I draw on examples from across the spectrum of distance education practice, including different paradigms and generations of provision. The contexts I have referred to in some detail provide insights into the continuing practice of distance language learning. Some of the programmes and courses will have changed by the time the book is published but since I have focused on typical examples and standard programmes, they will still reflect what is current practice in distance language learning, and the kinds of issues and

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lessons that can shape our analysis and understanding of distance language learning.

There is relatively little published research in distance language learning, and most of this exists as accounts of practice or descriptions of language programmes. In particular there is an absence of the kind of ‘close’ research to investigate what distance language teachers and learners actually do, and how this relates to the development of language skills. There are some exceptions and I draw on those studies quite extensively. Part of the purpose of the book is to identify gaps in the understanding of practices and in our knowledge of the field, and to suggest important avenues for research.

### **Audience**

This book is aimed at language teachers, researchers and professionals with an interest in distance learning contexts. While the subject matter of the book intersects with a number of related fields – such as network-based language teaching and the use of the web for language teaching – I have maintained the orientation of the book towards as complete a representation as possible of distance language learning in all its variability. The concepts and frameworks discussed here will appeal to those applied linguists and teachers with knowledge and experience of instructional contexts and opportunities for language learning beyond those of the conventional face-to-face classroom. It will be of particular interest to anyone who has worked within distance learning contexts – either as a language learner, a language teacher or a teacher educator.

### **Overview**

This book is organised into three major thematic sections, beginning – in Part I – with a background to distance language learning. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of distance language learning, with examples from a range of contexts. Together they illustrate the diversity that exists in the design of distance learning environments, and the different emphases, concerns and issues which arise within particular settings. Matters of definition are considered briefly, then two further ways of introducing distance language learning are presented – through an overview of the landscape of the field, and then by focusing on the challenges for language learners that form part of the distance learning experience. Chapter 2 examines a number of learning systems and movements related to distance education – such as online learning – together with

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the features of language courses that have been developed within those different forms of provision. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of current trends that are essentially linked to developments in technology. Attention is also given to many emerging issues in the rapidly changing environments for distance language learning; these include participation, access and quality, the development of interactive competence and the emergence of new constraints. The final chapter in Part I provides a theoretical framework for distance language learning. It is derived from student rationalities of the process which place the interface developed between learner and learning context at the centre of the process of distance language learning.

Part II moves to a focus on learners within distance language learning contexts. Chapter 5 argues that a key challenge for anyone working within the distance context is to develop a practical knowledge of distance language learners. The chapter moves from demographic approaches to contemporary approaches which emphasise a more dynamic conception of learners, including a focus on the affective domain and on influences within individual learning environments. Chapter 6 concerns the initial experience of distance language learning and discusses the complex factors and processes involved in adjusting to a new context for language learning. The second half of the chapter explores the knowledge and beliefs learners develop in relation to their experiences of distance language learning. Learner autonomy is the subject of Chapter 7. Emphasis is placed on different representations of learner autonomy – as learner independence or as collaborative control of learning experiences – which stem from different paradigms of distance language learning and their associated goals and ideals.

Part III is devoted to key aspects of the distance learning context: learner support, learning sources and new learning spaces. Learner support is an essential component of distance learning and can best be understood as a response to individual learners rather than as access to information or resources. It fulfils a range of functions integral to the development of effective distance learning experiences. This is discussed in Chapter 8 together with a consideration of the situated nature of learner support, and appropriate forms of support. Chapter 9 looks at the learning sources available within a distance language course. It critically examines the more traditional understanding of course content and presents an alternative view that centres on learners as they actively select and construct content from a range of potential learning sources. It is these sources that contribute to their learning environment and become, in effect, the course. The final chapter looks ahead to the kinds of new learning spaces which are emerging within the field, and to the frameworks which have been developed to understand the nature and affor-

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dances of these spaces. To conclude I consider the place of innovation within the field and argue that the way ahead for distance language learning can best be understood if attention is paid not just to new developments, but to developing a broader understanding of distance language learning contexts and of those who are most involved – the learners.

One of the aims in writing this book has been to provide a starting point: an introduction to the field, a foundation for further enquiry and research, a catalyst for continuing interest in the field. To this end I have included an Appendix, which lists resources, journals and newsgroups related to the concerns, issues and contexts that have formed much of the focus of the book.