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Part I Background

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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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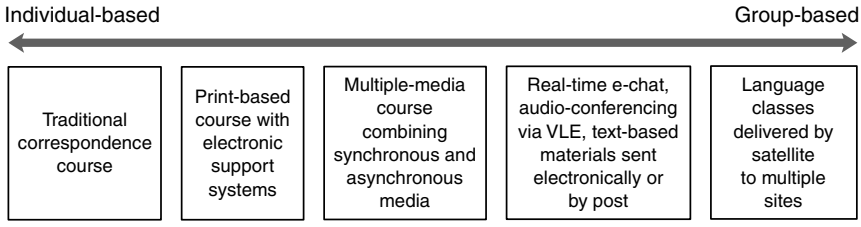

Figure 1.1 A spectrum of distance language learning contexts

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

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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.

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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).

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