Chapter 101

Beginning Chinese as a Foreign Language Online Course Design:
Utilizing Multiple Digital Modes and Assessments

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ABSTRACT

The explosive worldwide growth of the internet inspired the initial emergence and further implementation of distance teaching and learning in a multitude of areas, including languages (Harasim, 2000; Holmberg et al., 2005; White, 2003, 2006; Blake & Delforge, 2007; Hampel & de los Arcos, 2013). The change from the traditional classroom environment to a more diversified and flexible distance setting has been embraced by many educators, administrators, and students, yet it has also generated doubt and resistance from others. Students may potentially benefit from more efficient uses of multimedia resources with increased critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills (Tricker et al., 2001; Felix, 2002; Spangle, Hodne & Schierling, 2002; Levy & Stockwell, 2006). Meanwhile, critics also highlight the potential drawbacks for distance learning students, including isolation from peers, lack of engagement, and insufficient technical support (Shield 2000; Muilenburg and Berge, 2005; Simonson et al., 2009; Berge 1999; Hara and Kling 2000; Bower, 2001; Wang & Chen 2013). This chapter concerns the ways in which distance online learning content can be designed and developed through the utilization of multimedia and cultural-enriched materials for first-year-level College Chinese Foreign Language (CFL) courses. Discussions about employing virtual interaction, including student-content, student-instructor, and student-student interaction in course design and course design development. The chapter will end with discussions of the current challenges and new directions for a better practice of teaching and learning of Chinese language courses at a distance.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Distance Language Learning

Distance education has expanded rapidly in the last two decades to solve campus problems such as budget cuts, overcrowding, and student demand for flexible schedules (Bates, 1997; Furstenberg, 1997; Joliffe & Stevens, 2001; Collis & Moonen, 2001; Fleming et al., 2002; Garbett, 2011). This type of course has been defined as a learning environment in which students and teachers are separated by distance and sometimes by time (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p.1). Extensive efforts are currently being invested in developing distance-learning environments. Distance course offerings are increasing at a faster rate than their traditional counterparts, with the number of higher-education distance courses nearly tripling between 1995 and 2003 (Beck, 2010), and almost 100% of public institutions claim distance instruction as a strategic section of their long-term plans (Major, 2010).

Flexibility is no doubt a significant advantage of distance courses for students. Flexibility attracts learners to distance-learning programs more than any other aspect (Schoech, 2000). In the distance environment, students have control over time, pace, and modality of material access (Egbert & Jessup, 1996), while instructors can tailor instruction, facilitate understanding, and provide feedback to each student (Easton, 2003).

As distance-learning practice and research proliferate over time, language learners, instructors, and researchers also sense the flexibility and potential of the new distance language environment (White, 2006). The acquisition of a foreign language requires a language-rich environment in which learners are continuously exposed to productive skills. McDonough (2001) catalogs the extensive variety of approaches in online programs that provide engaging multiple-format methodologies to language learning, e.g., applications entail colorful graphics, motion pictures, video, and sound, all integrated into real-life settings. Additionally, McDonough refers to how language learners have unlimited access to videotaped instructional sessions, notes, PowerPoint presentations, podcasts, tutorials, practice exercises, and assessments.

Compared to more "content-based" academic subjects, the challenges for teaching language at a distance, in particular, the acquisition and practice of the four primary skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, are magnified to a much greater extent on in distance learning. It has been acknowledged that for language acquisition to occur, learners should be exposed to a sufficient amount of comprehensible input, both oral and written (Krashen, 1982), and need opportunities to produce comprehensible output; that is, to offer oral and written forms in the target language (Swain, 1985). This requirement is not easy to satisfy in any language learning setting, but it is particularly more complex in a distance language-learning context, given the geographic distance between learners and instructors, and the often asynchronous communication and feedback among them. A number of scholars question less listening and speaking opportunities that challenge the development of oral proficiency (Felix, 2001; Hurd, 2005, 2007; Jaggars, 2014). Affective factors, including learning anxiety with isolation from a language learning group (Brown, 2006), and lack of instant feedback (Hurd, 2007), are also subject to extensive criticism toward distance language learning.

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