

APPROACHES TO DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to familiarize with distance learning course which offers access to a form of training and replaces the traditional face-to-face courses in English language teaching methodology and discuss how to use and adept teaching materials creatively so as to develop students' competencies in order to meet the requirements of the national curriculum for English.

Keywords: distance learning, course requirements, objectives, assignments

I. Aims of Distance Learning Course for Students.

A large part of the present paper includes practical suggestions in designing a distance learning course for students which dealt with the most methodology topics required by the *Minister of Education's Order* no. 344 Of 21.03.2000.

Being a different type of teaching, distance learning course should facilitate the learning process without imposing a rigid method and develop effective individual strategies. Teachers need to be aware of their students' needs, interests, learning styles and motivation. They also need to keep a balance between easy and difficult tasks. In this way, the materials adaptation can turn into a worthwhile activity in order to raise and maintain students' motivation for learning and to provide them with some kind of support for their learning. To teach successfully, apart from organising appropriate types of interaction, teachers use a variety of materials.

Before writing this type of course, it should be taken into consideration if:

- The textbook covers all the components of the stated-decreed curriculum.
- The aims of the textbook meet the students' need.

- Is it a good resource of learning for students
- Allows different teaching and learning styles
- The content is organised in terms of topics, structures and skills.

Distance learning course is especially designed for individual work on the improvement of students' knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar. This is mainly based on giving students the chance to solve a considerable number of reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary tasks. All these activities could involve writing even if reading is more often used than writing: activities ranging from looking at the clock, to glancing at the newspaper and checking a phone number, all involve reading. Reading is a survival skill which enables modern people to react to social demands.

Before asking students to do a reading comprehension exercise the materials should be introduced as follow:

- Discuss the general theme with the class;
- Deal with the different vocabulary by making the fullest possible use of the students
- Continue with a group discussion based on a few general questions written on the blackboard
- For each level use activity cards appropriately (gap fill, multiple choice, true/false)
- Organise some follow-up work ("Sum up the story..." or "Write an essay expressing your point of view related to this topic...").

Usually writing and reading activities are used together.

Most people can function effectively with the ability to write simple things such as daily programme, doing shopping, spending holidays while others need to write reports, essays or newspapers articles. Reading is an important key to good writing. Only after reading and analysing a text type, can we ask the students to write examples of the respective text type themselves. The purpose of the writing tasks is to practise English in a controlled way.

On completion of course work, students will be able to:

- develop abilities in **reading** and **writing**. There is no focus on **listening** and **speaking** due to the specific nature of distance learning. Listening implies active involvement. Listening has long been considered a passive skill, but I do not agree. Listening is a

complex skill which deserve special attention. When speaking it is the student who selects the language and can compensate for his deficiencies. When listening he cannot exercise any control over the language that is used. However, students are encouraged to use every chance they have to improve their listening skill by accessing various sources. They are also advised to practice speaking with their peers or more proficient learners of English because shy students are inhibited about trying to use the foreign language and the students do not have the necessary linguistic capabilities to match with the linguistic demands of the activity.

- improve their grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Progress in these two domains of language study can be achieved mainly through individual work and the bibliography list suggests books that students **must** use on their own.

II. Factors in High Quality Distance Learning Courses

Joseph McClary of Liberty University in his article, “Factors in High Quality Distance Learning Courses,” appearing in the Summer 2013 issue of the *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, examines the components of a high quality distance learning course and some of the barriers to their development:

- ***Equitable use:*** “Equitable use involves ensuring content available to all learners.”
- ***Flexible use:*** “Flexible use involves offering content in multiple formats,” McClary writes.
- ***Simple and intuitive:*** “It is generally a good practice across institutions of higher learning to commit to a single learning management system, and then develop a common course layout” McClary writes.
- ***Perceptible information.*** Perceptible information refers to presenting information in different ways. “Perceptible information involves enhancing content with descriptors, captions and transcriptions....Providing perceptible information involves not only accommodating accessibility but providing means for alternative access for the benefit

of students with different learning modalities,” McClary writes.

- ***Tolerance for error:*** “Tolerance for error provides students the opportunity easily correct errors,” McClary explains. For example, students need easy ways to work with the instructor to resubmit work if a revision is allowed. Within administrative function, using “centralized authentication services,” typically a single username/password combination, allows the student easier access to registration, library, and other online functions”.
- ***Low physical and technical effort:*** “Browser checks, usability testing, clear design, and assistive technologies “allow students to dedicate more cognitive focus on content and the learning process as opposed to the learning environment itself.”
- ***Community of learners and support:*** “Good course design incorporates group learning and employs technology to facilitate those interactions at a distance,” McClary writes.
- ***Instructional climate:*** “One thread that runs consistently through research studies is that interaction is a vital element in the instructional process. Course design and instructors bear a responsibility to engage students in a meaningful way,” McClary writes.

In addition to these factors, McClary also suggests that “good distance learning courses are evaluated regularly” on factors like student reactions, learning, transfer (including whether the students will use the information), results, and return on investment.

III. Course Content

The course generally consists of some units, more or less similar in length and requiring approximately the same time for study. Each unit ends with a ‘language practice’ task which is meant to give students grammar and vocabulary practice. Any piece of writing should be marked taking into consideration all aspects of communicative writing, not only grammatical accuracy or faultless spelling. An essay might be fully accurate in grammar and spelling and still be totally inappropriate in terms of vocabulary.

Students’ course work will also include a ‘language improvement notebook’ which will be submitted for inspection as proof of individual work on various grammar and vocabulary

areas of interest.

In assessing materials we have to bear in mind some general principles:

- Accessibility
- Flexibility
- Variety
- Appropriacy to the content
- Authenticity
- Gradual progress
- Suitability to level
- Balance of skills/tasks
- Educational values
- Clear organization and clarity of instructions
- Continuity.

According to McClary, one of the most important factors in writing a course is “ensuring it is up-to-date and relevant,” which means that “every module of content in the course should revolve around specific course objectives.” He suggests that “a good distance learning course leaves *no ambiguity* in the students mind regarding how content applies to objectives.”

- . ***Reusability*** of the content is another factor contributing to quality. “Institutions of higher learning have found that reusing content is an efficient means by which to develop online programs,” he writes. Indeed, “for institutions that want to leverage the economies of scale, reuse of content is mandatory.”
- ***Course Instructor:*** McClary cites research that suggests that the role of the distance learning instructor is “ambiguous and often ill-defined,” with some people believing the instructor is even unnecessary. However, the instructor is actually a critical component of quality, with the instructor having an impact on student involvement in

the course and learning as measured by objective performance, course grades, and student satisfaction.

This makes it critical that distance learning courses be taught by instructors who are passionate about their subject, approachable, and able to encourage engagement in the distance medium. “Good distance learning instructors are able to knowledgeably engage students on the mechanics of writing style and the topic they are instructing,” McClary writes.

“Online instructors can have a tendency to over commit themselves professionally and consequently minimize their own expectations during a distance learning course,” says McClary about his own observation of instructors. He also recommends that universities provide adequate training to help instructors learn about the different kinds of demands these classes will place on them.

- ***Support Systems:*** Finally, McClary explains that quality distance learning courses require robust support systems in the areas of academic support, administrative support, and technical support. He writes: “Academic support involves instructors providing substantive engagement and feedback for course activities. Administrative support involves things such as financial aid, advising, registrar services etc. For schools using technical systems to deliver education, it is not a matter of whether a student will have problems; it is a matter of *when* they will have problems. Academic, administrative, and technical support services should be evaluated regularly as a part of the course evaluation. In addition, evaluation data should be made available to the appropriate stakeholders to ensure accountability and ongoing improvement.”

McClary urges universities to standardize on a single course delivery system, whether that be a commercially-available system or one that is homegrown. Failure to do so can cause many problems. “This non-uniformity has disadvantages including lack of the economies of scale in system licensing, disparate training programs for faculty, different course design requirements and strategies, different systems for students to learn etc. In situations such as this, lack of an institutional vision for distance learning is usually at the center of the problem. If disparate delivery systems are to be used, there should be a strong objective behind the decision,” he writes.

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This makes it critical that distance learning courses be taught by instructors who are passionate about their subject, approachable, and able to encourage engagement in the distance medium. It also requires universities to hire distance learning instructors who can engage the student both about the subject matter and about how they convey their knowledge. “Good distance learning instructors are able to knowledgably engage students on the mechanics of writing style and the topic they are instructing,” McClary writes.

Of course, online instructors must also be cognizant of the demands that teaching will place on them even beyond knowledge of subject and ability to work with students. “Online instructors can have a tendency to over commit themselves professionally and consequently minimize their own expectations during a distance learning course,” says McClary about his own observation of instructors. He also recommends that universities provide adequate training to help instructors learn about the different kinds of demands these classes will place on them.

IV. Cognitive competences

Coursebooks should correspond to learners ‘needs. They should match the aims and objectives of the approved syllabus or of the language –learning programme in terms of language content, skills and communicative strategies. It is very important the coursebooks should facilitate learners ‘progress and take them forward as effectively as possible toward achieving the objectives. And take them forward as effectively as possible towards achieving the competences. Here is a list of such competences.

- understanding of issues related to major points of interest in the domain of English grammar and vocabulary;
- acquisition of lexical and grammatical terminology;

- understanding of processes involved in the writing of academic texts.

Practical competences

- application of theoretical knowledge to language practice tasks.

Communicative competences

- understanding of the correct use of grammatical and lexical structures mainly in written discourse.

V. Evaluation, assessment, testing.

“As ye teach, so shall ye test”.

There are many techniques of assessing students’ language and abilities, their performance. These assessments must have a positive effect. Testing is the most widely spread technique used for assessing students. The evolution of language testing is linked with the evolution of language teaching. Broadly speaking, there have been three stages in the teaching of foreign languages:

1. **Traditional** : grammar-translation approach
2. **Modern**: Audio-lingual/structural approach
3. **Post-modern**: communicative approach.

Knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, functions, reading skills, writing skills and knowledge of culture are all needed to produce a good translation.

Communicative test is one that approximates to real language use in the real world.

Keith Morrow (quoted by Richard West) lists seven features of communicative tests which follow communicative teaching:

1. **Interaction-based**: the language used in the students’ test should replicate the language used in real world in order to measure their ability to perform in realistic language situations.
2. **Unpredictability**: students should genuinely produce language or react to it;
3. **Content**: students’ performance should be measured in terms of appropriateness to the topic, register and roles they assume during interaction which stimulates real life

situations.

4. **Purpose:** a test item, especially of speaking or writing, should have in view the expectations of a known/unknown addressee
5. **Performance:** the test should measure the students 'ability to use both their knowledge of language and strategies for dealing with real life.
6. **Authenticity:** the communicative test has to demonstrate the students 'ability of speaking
7. **Behaviour-based:** the test should be designed to offer students the opportunity to give appropriate responses to unexpected input under time pressure.

VI. Conclusions

Distance learning will remain distinctive in future as well as an innovative approach for electronically delivering, well-designed, learner oriented at anywhere, anytime through use of the internet. Distance learning will remain as part of E - learning , web based learning through virtual classrooms and digital teamwork, where contents will continue to be delivered through internet, audio, video tape, and conferencing through video; satellite and etc. (Hedge 2004:128-145).The rapid and intense use of Information and communication Technology in education will continue to play a role in developed countries facilitating them to establish more and more information and communication technology based universities (Toor 2005: 67-76).

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