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CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS BOOK

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LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS FORMS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of synchronous and asynchronous distance education (DE) in the development of the four core language skills—speaking, writing, listening, and reading—and examines the crucial role of the teacher in facilitating effective language acquisition in an online environment. It highlights how different DE formats impact the mastery of productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) skills. The paper argues that synchronous DE is particularly beneficial for developing speaking and listening skills due to real-time interaction and immediate feedback, while asynchronous DE supports writing and reading skills by providing students with more time to reflect and complete tasks at their own pace. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the evolving role of the language teacher in DE, who must adapt to technological advancements, engage students through various interactive and task-based activities, and foster self-regulated learning. The findings suggest that a blended approach combining both synchronous and asynchronous DE methods is most effective for language learning, as it allows for the development of all four language skills in a balanced and integrated manner.

Keywords: synchronous, asynchornous, four skills, acquisition, teacher's role

INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) has rapidly become an integral part of language learning in the digital era, offering diverse opportunities for students to acquire and develop language skills. With the increasing availability of technological tools and platforms, DE can be delivered in various forms, with synchronous and asynchronous modes being the most commonly used. These two approaches differ significantly in their structure, pace, and interaction style, each offering unique advantages and challenges for learners. Understanding the influence of synchronous and asynchronous DE on the acquisition of the four language skills—speaking, writing, listening, and reading—is crucial for both educators and learners alike.

Synchronous distance education refers to real-time, live communication between the teacher and students, such as through video conferences or chat sessions, allowing for instant interaction and immediate feedback. This mode of learning is particularly beneficial for developing speaking and

listening skills, as it provides learners with opportunities for real-time conversation and auditory input. In contrast, asynchronous DE allows learners to access materials and complete tasks at their own pace, without the need for real-time interaction. This flexible approach is often more conducive to the development of writing and reading skills, as it gives students the time and space to reflect, revise, and engage in independent learning.

The acquisition of the four language skills—speaking, writing, reading, and listening—requires careful consideration of the specific advantages of synchronous and asynchronous formats. However, productive and receptive skills tend to benefit more from synchronous DE due to the immediate interaction and direct feedback that foster language production and comprehension. This alpplied to writing and reading, doing exercises related to reading in the same time. On the other hand, the receptive skill can also benefit from asynchronous environments, where learners can take their time to engage with the materials, process information at their own speed, and reflect on their work.

Speaking in general, effective language acquisition depends on many factors, such as collaboration, integration, participation, responsibility, critical thinking and higher order thinking. The researcher Perveen (2016) coined the term "Elltivity" (E-language learning activity) for any activity designed for the online language classroom. According to e-learning pedagogy, the lecture should give students the most assistance possible in accomplishing their goals and preventing frustration. The same author further emphasizes that the first step in designing online language learning courses is to conduct students' needs analysis, which should be pedagogic, psychological and social in order to achieve successful communication.

Asynchronous language learning enables students from different backgrounds to join and work on composing sentences, by writing and re-writing them on discussion boards. (Perveen, 2016, p. 24). They can feel peer pressure from others that are able to see their comments or teachers that can help them come up with better formulations. On the other hand, they have all the time they need to practice Elltivities. Speaking about synchronous language learning, it is beneficial for L2 learners as they are directly exposed to native or non/native listening input. What is more, they simultaneously get feedback on their errors, which contributes to conscious language learning. However, the need to immediately construct sentences and comprehend the teacher's presentation can lead to learners' anxiety, which has an adverse effect on L2 acquisition.

Furthermore, the role of the teacher in distance education is very important in facilitating the effective development of these language skills. Teachers must navigate their roles as facilitators, motivators, and guides, adapting their teaching strategies to suit the unique characteristics of both synchronous and asynchronous environments. The teacher's ability to engage students in interactive activities, provide timely feedback, and promote self-regulated learning is essential for maximizing the benefits of both DE modalities.

This paper explores how synchronous and asynchronous distance education impact the development of the four language skills—speaking, writing, listening, and reading—while examining the teacher's evolving role in fostering language acquisition. By understanding how these different formats influence skill development, educators can design more effective language learning experiences that balance the strengths of both synchronous and asynchronous approaches. The paper also advocates for a blended learning approach that combines both formats, offering learners a comprehensive and flexible path to language mastery.

TEACHING THE FOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS IN DE

All those concerned with English language teaching and learning are familiar with the fact that in order to improve your English proficiency, you need to work on developing the four skills. Besides grammar and vocabulary, which are essential and elementary, English learners need to work on developing reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. There are different strategies that can be applied for mastering these skills. Here, we would like to pay attention to how different forms of distance education can be applied in developing the four skills.

PRODUCTIVE SKILLS IN DE

Language teachers know that language acquisition consists of mastering four skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening. There are two productive and two receptive skills. Speaking and writing belong to the group of productive skills as the language is used to produce messages in spoken or written form. They are also known as active skills. For the purpose of successful communication, as Harmer (2001) suggests, students need to structure their discourse in order to be understood by their listeners or readers.

Hence, it would not be wrong to state that the synchronous form of distance education would be more convenient to develop these skills. This especially applies to the speaking skill as language is merely learned only through interaction and communication with other learners. Being "online only" makes us address this question and discuss all options that we have at our disposal. Moreover, when students speak and write in the lesson, they rehearse the language, and this goes in favor of the synchronous form of DE. As Rigo & Mikus (2021) suggest, synchronous distance education is more effective in mastering speaking skills as it accommodates real time communication, provides immediate feedback, prompts learners to take a more active part in the learning process and boosts their language production, especially oral production, practice of which is crucial in language learning. Alizadeh, & Sadeghi (2010) also agree that speaking is mostly developed when students work in synchronization with other students and/or the teacher. Otherwise, the speaking skill is not developed. They tested the improvement of the four skills using the asynchronous form of DE, or E-mailing. Of all English language skills, speaking was developed the least.

The writing skill can also be developed in the synchronous form of distance education as there is immediate feedback and error correction by the teacher. On the other hand, regarding writing bigger reports and writing assignments, the asynchronous form of distance education can be suitable as well. Students may follow the previously assigned timetable and deadlines while working at their own pace. After completing the assignment, they can attach it to the tool used for distance learning, so the teacher can begin grading. The research conducted by Alizadeh, & Sadeghi (2010) also showed that writing skills were better developed in the asynchronous form of distance education, as students had a lot of time at their disposal to think, do the research and write their assignments. They worked at their own pace, they were able to do more careful reading and had more time to reflect on their writing as well as to do the peer-reviewing. Finally, a refined version was sent to the teacher. Students that studied writing synchronously did not have such freedom and time at their disposal. They were supposed to act at the moment and write the first thought on their mind, without hesitating. That is the reason why the asynchronous form of DE offers better conditions for developing writing skills.

Perveen (2016) agrees that the synchronous form of distance education is the best form for practicing speaking, as the exposure to real language and being able to participate in discussions is crucial. Another important thing here is the immediate oral feedback. When it comes to the writing skill, the author agrees that the asynchronous form is better for acquiring this skill as students have time to think deeper

about writing their assignment, emails and other tasks. In other words, they will be able to produce better written language.

Regarding the development of productive skills, we can conclude that synchronous and asynchronous tools can function together as both are beneficial to a certain extent. This also means that in language acquisition, synchronous and asynchronous forms cannot be separated, as different skills are developed better in the one or the other.

RECEPTIVE SKILLS IN DE

The other two language skills are reading and listening. They are called receptive skills since they do not involve production of language, but exposure to language, i.e. to read or to listen in in order to understand it. Harmer (2001) explains that the receptive skills are the ways people extract meaning from the discourse they see or hear.

Regarding mastering the receptive skills, since there is no need to produce language, one can assume that they are better developed using asynchronous tools of distance education. That means that written and audio materials can be posted on the appropriate asynchronous distance learning tools for students to download and use at their own speed. The important thing is that they understand the message, which will enable them to learn and retain vocabulary and improve their language competence. Therefore, reading and listening skills are better practiced by doing certain exercises, assigning particular tasks related to the reading or listening text that students are exposed to.

On the one hand, students can work on their own, using asynchronous tools, taking into consideration that they need to be supplied with the correct answers so they can check their understanding. On the other hand, every foreign language teacher is familiar with the strategies that are available to students for developing their reading and listening skills. These strategies can be taught in interactive communication with students. Hence, we hold the opinion that they are better acquired in synchronous distance education that mostly resembles the face-to-face or traditional classroom.

When speaking about receptive skills, Perveen (2016) points out that the synchronous form of DE is better for mastering listening skills. The presentation of the lectures and the real time discussion influence the improvement of the listening skills. On the other hand, the author holds the opinion that reading skills are probably better developed in the asynchronous form of DE. In this form of education, learners can be supplied with books, handouts, they can even be recommended websites. Being previously introduced to the reading strategies, these skills can be improved by working on the language in isolation, at their own pace, that goes in favor of the asynchronous form of distance education.

Regarding reading skills, that are supposedly better acquired in the asynchronous form of DE, we have a different view. In reading lessons we assign different reading tasks to our students. Tasks may vary from matching the heading to the appropriate paragraph, finding the missing sentence or the missing paragraph, logically ordering paragraphs, multiple choice questions, etc. For all of these tasks, it is better if students work in groups and together complete the task. Now, group work is not an option in the asynchronous form of DE. On the other hand, the tools used for the synchronous form of DE offer the option to divide students into different groups where they can work on the task with their peers. This also resembles a face-to-face classroom. When it comes to extensive reading, including books, newspaper articles, the asynchronous form of DE functions better as it is not bound by time, students can work on their own time schedule.

The research of Alizadeh, & Sadeghi (2010) showed that listening skills were equally acquired in both synchronous and asynchronous form of education, as the same procedure is followed in

listening assignments and completing different tasks. Regarding listening skills, we again consider the synchronous form of DE as a better alternative. The tasks assigned to students resemble those of reading assignments, but here students listen to the text instead of reading it. The teachers play the recording, as the synchronous tools of DE offer that option. All students listen to the recording, complete the assignment individually or in pairs/groups and then discuss the results in groups or with the teacher. But again, receiving direct feedback is important, and that is the reason why we consider the synchronous form of DE as a better solution for developing listening skills.

From everything stated above, we can conclude that the synchronous form of education is a better option for foreign language acquisition considering the communicative approach and language acquisition that happens only by interaction and not in isolation. However, there are aspects of language learning that can be better achieved when the two forms of DE are blended and not separated. We can repeat what we have concluded before, for the most successful language acquisition, a combination of both forms of DE is the best option.

TEACHER'S ROLE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

It is said that a teacher wears many hats. What does it mean? It refers to the different roles a modern teacher assumes in the modern classroom, especially in the newest virtual one. The role of the teacher has shifted a lot since the old traditional classrooms. The approach to teaching has changed. From grammar-translation method to communicative approach, the teacher has taken many roles. Language is learned in interaction. That means the teacher does not just stand in front of the classroom and gives lectures, but also has many other roles. One of the most important roles is to facilitate learning. If the teacher is teaching, but students are not learning, he/she is not fulfilling his/her job. In order to facilitate learning, the teacher needs to engage and motivate students, he/she could be a mentor, an adviser, an instructor, a technology expert, a counselor, a manager of the learning process and so much more.

According to Ghani et al. (2015), all four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) should be given equal importance in the foreign language classroom – the same applies to distance education as well.   Neglecting a skill may result in poor performance of the learner. Hence, the teacher should provide access to all instructional materials to learners in facilitating language acquisition. Therefore, some roles of the teacher could be a facilitator or an independent participant in the learning process in distance education as in the traditional face-to-face education. Harmer (2001) explains that the role of facilitator is actually related to a learner-centered approach to education. He further suggests that while performing many different roles, the teacher is in the end facilitator, because he facilitates the language acquisition.

Carolina Torres Escobar (2021) holds the opinion that teachers should be proactive and productive in distance learning. They should not be mere technicians and instruction followers. This means that they should take responsibility for their profession. They should assume the role of leaders and give positive examples though their action. They should be committed to teaching strategies, not to resist technology, reinvent the education if it is necessary and give more than they are officially required to. Moreover, teachers should have realistic expectations and know that some students express themselves better in the synchronous form of DE, while others need time for reflection, which goes in favor of the asynchronous form of DE.

The introduction of task-based learning and the evolution of information and communication technologies that contribute to the development of DE are shifting the demands and the roles of teachers, as Roessingh (2014) suggests. The changes require creative teachers, dedicated to the work of creating meaningful tasks using online tools and applications in order to produce better learning outcomes and

to influence the development of learner's autonomy, which is very important for future generations. Moreover, the teacher should adapt to the newest methods of language acquisition, learning the language through the content and the communicative method in the distance form of education. Hence, the job of the teacher is not easy and simple. Roessingh (2014) further explains that translation and grammar worksheets should be replaced with tasks involving negotiation of meaning, problem solving, critical thinking, purposeful and authentic use of the language. What is more, teachers need to accept that students nowadays are digital natives, being in front of the computer at the convenience of their home is natural for them and not an obstacle. Hence, teachers should not fear that students know more, but use their potential to make the most of the distance education.

The role of the teacher in DE is to adapt quickly to the changes, to become an expert in transforming the physical material to online material for the students in the synchronous and asynchronous form of DE. Furthermore, foreign language acquisition is a specific issue that requires maximum dedication by students. Therefore, the teacher should be psychologically ready to respond to the challenge, to be able to motivate students in different interactive activities using group or pair-work as well as different learning applications. One of the applications that foreign language teachers use is Kahoot. According to Bawa (2018), digital educational games are important for keeping the interest of the learners. He further suggests that the performance and engagement is increased when the game Kahoot is incorporated in the lecture. Using this game, the teachers assume the roles of game hosts and participate in the creating of the questions, according to the study material. Moreover, it provides learners with problem-solving, social interaction and collaborative learning, which is especially important in distance education, especially in the synchronous form of DE.

Another important task for teachers, especially in DE is to promote self-regulated learning. Peeters et al. (2014) claim that it is the root of success in academic life and beyond. What the teacher needs to possess is his/her own self-regulatory skills in order to transfer them to the students. Hence, this is another role that the teacher needs to play, especially important in DE. For that purpose, teachers need to use the work environment to learn. In that way, the role they need to assume is the role of a learner.

One of the most important roles of the teacher in distance education is the role of organizer. As Harmer (2001) suggests, in this role the teacher organizes the students to do various tasks. Through that process, the teacher provides students with information, tells them how they are going to do the activity, and divides them into pairs and groups, if that is what the activity requires. In the end, the teacher finishes the activity by giving explanations and clarifications. The role of organizer is intensified in distance education, because the most important thing for the teacher is to organize the lessons.

Sometimes, when students are lost for words, especially in a speaking activity, the role of the teacher is prompter. This role is of the same importance for the traditional as well as distance education. This is the role of the teacher when he prompts students to use English instead of their mother tongue. In distance education, if students work in groups, the role of the teacher is to visit all groups, check if they use the English language and prompt them to do so in order to make sure language is being practiced. This role matches the role of observer as well. The role of prompter is also important when working on writing assignment, when students are not sure how to continue.

There are cases, especially in distance education, when the teachers assume the role of a participant, so instead of prompting the students from the outside they can enliven things from the inside, as Harmer (2001) suggests. However, the role of resource in distance education is to some extent diminished, as being online, the students can have different sources of knowledge and vocabulary.

We have presented many ways in which the role of the teacher is not simple and cannot be defined with one definition. It is even more complicated in distance education. The teacher needs to provide

some kind of support to the students. On top of that, he/she must make sure that they learn and improve by keeping them motivated and engaging them in new and challenging interactive activities. Moreover, the teacher needs to continue learning   in order to be able to embrace the challenges of modern times. Thus, by continuously learning, the teacher can teach the students how to learn and to self-direct and regulate their own learning, which helps students become autonomous learners. Indeed, what a good teacher does entails a heavy workload that should be appreciated.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, distance education (DE) plays a significant role in the development of language skills, both productive and receptive. As explored, both synchronous and asynchronous learning methods contribute uniquely to language acquisition, with each being more effective for different skills. Synchronous learning facilitates immediate interaction and feedback, making it ideal for developing speaking and listening skills through real-time communication. In contrast, asynchronous learning provides learners with the flexibility to reflect, revise, and refine their written work, making it a stronger option for writing and reading skills. The integration of both forms, therefore, offers a comprehensive approach to language learning, ensuring that learners benefit from the strengths of each modality.

The role of the teacher in this context is crucial, as they must assume multiple roles, from facilitator to motivator and organizer, to ensure successful learning outcomes. Teachers must adapt to new technological tools and pedagogical methods to support students effectively in both synchronous and asynchronous environments. Moreover, their ability to promote self-regulated learning and maintain student engagement through innovative practices is essential for fostering autonomy and long-term success. Ultimately, the blend of synchronous and asynchronous distance education, along with a dynamic and adaptable teaching approach, creates an optimal learning environment for language learners.

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