# The Problem of Social Interactions in Distance Language Learning

*Tsovinar Arakelyan*
*Police Educational Complex of Armenia*

**Abstract**
The purpose of this article is to highlight the problem of the lack of social interactions in the distance language learning context and to suggest optimal solutions towards the development of social presence in virtual learning environment. Specifically, five main points figure prominently in the model of interaction development: implementation of parter-feedback system, collaborative preparation for online lessons, incorporation of video-recorded exercises in the course content, creation of students' profiles and facing different cultural and linguistic dimensions.

**Key words:** Distance language learning, virtual learning context, in-class activities, social interactions, video-conferencing.

**Introduction**
The last decade has witnessed an enormous expansion in distance learning opportunities. Rapid developments in information and communications technology have increased awareness of and demand for distance education with an emphasis on online language learning mode. A wide range of other factors, such as the need for global education offerings and the desire of many institutions to reach new audiences contributed to the overall generalization of distance learning opportunities. In fact, the key benefits of distance learning seem to be as follows: the belief in accessibility and convenience of online technologies and time-and-cost-effectiveness. Accordingly, distance learning opportunities are becoming increasingly visible part of educational provision.

While distance language learning offers an array of advantages, it also places new demands on participants: to acquire new roles and to develop new skills. This reformulation of participants' roles and skills creates a wide range of challenges in distance language learning context.

The purpose of this article is to highlight these challenges with a specific emphasis on the problem of the lack of social interactions in the distance language learning context and to suggest solutions towards the development of social presence in virtual learning context. The article is organized into two main parts. Part 1 introduces the concept of distance learning and gives insight into the main challenges of distance language learning programs faced by participants of either side. Part 2 provides possible solutions to the problem of interaction development in a virtual language learning context. The relevance of the article is not only data reporting but also suggesting practical methods that could be successfully implemented in distance language learning courses.

### Challenges in Distance Language Learning

In its broadest sense distance education is any formal instruction that involves a distance between the educator and the learner during the overall teaching process. In fact, distance learning began centuries ago in the form of instructional correspondence between traveling members of royal families and their tutors back home. In the 1800s, paper-based postal tuition or correspondence study courses became very popular among the working masses in Europe and America (Henrichsen 2001:1). In the 20th century, telecommunications technology – first radio, then television and finally computer networks entered the distance learning equation contributing to its further expansion.

Although distance education has achieved a new prominence, much about the overall teaching-learning process and the participants of either side remains little understood. The new technology provides educators with access to new audiences, but brings relatively little information about the nature of these audiences. Even if the distance learning is premised on technology as a bridge between educator and learners, still it doesn't give clear image of learner's motivation and responsiveness, accessibility and demands of the learning context. On the other hand, important aspects of the learning experience are transformed in the distance context. While distance learning creates wide-ranging advantages, it also places new demands on both educators and participants: to acquire new roles and to develop new skills. Accordingly, new challenges are imposed in compliance with the demands of distance learning virtual context. Particularly, these challenges for distance language learning context include:

*Isolation* – Actually, in face-to face language classrooms the establishment of a positive social climate and cohesion within the class are considered an important part of the teacher's role and integral to good practice. As part of this, language teachers and learners in face-to-face classrooms make use of a number of social, linguistic and context cues to understand and contribute to the dynamics of the classroom. The absence of physical presence in distance language learning contexts means the loss of cues which are available in face-to-face classrooms to support interactions and the socio-affective dimensions of learning and to maintain engagement between those present. There is also a reduction in teacher immediacy, which constitutes the verbal and non-verbal behaviors contributing to the establishment of relationships between teachers and learners. To put it another way, the climate of "social presence" and how it is created is the key difference in language teaching and learning in distance and face-to-face contexts. In fact, the perception of social presence by learners makes them feel part of the larger social context which in turn affects motivation, attitudes and social cohesion. In addition, much of the input comes from the interaction of peers within in-class activities (Cohen 1990:40). As distinct from face-to-face classrooms, actively involving learners and creating teacher-student and student-student interaction when these parties are widely separated is a daunting challenge in distance education. In distance learning courses using print media and the mail system, communications go back and forth at a slow pace. The lag between when a student asks a question and when the teacher answers it can take several days. Modern communications media have virtually overcome this challenge. Nowadays up-to-the-minute technology enables the educator and the learners to communicate back and

forth nearly instantaneously when they are hundreds of miles away. However, even when communications technology allows instantaneous message transmission, involvement and interaction don't occur automatically in distance learning settings. The human contact and sense of community that are natural in face-to-face classrooms are not so easy to duplicate when people study at a widely separated locations or different times. Thus, participants in many distance learning programs report feeling isolated (Henrichsen 2001:7).

*Motivation and self-discipline* – Motivating students who are geographically or temporally distant is also difficult but often crucial. The problem is that many students enter their course of study with high initial motivation, but that the motivation to enroll in the course and to begin learning is not always maintained (White 2003:115). This observed decline in motivation is linked with a number of factors: loneliness, isolation, competing commitment, absence of structuring aspects of face-to-face classes and difficulty in adjusting to a distance language learning context. Specifically, the influence of loneliness is strengthened in distance language learning context. Certainly, students often find distance language learning to be somewhat isolated experience with relatively few opportunities for social interaction. It may be also difficult for learners to maintain motivation in the distance context without structuring effect of face-to-face classes. This becomes more difficult in the context of online language schools where there are no external deadlines for students to complete a task or a framework that helps them figure out their progress and guide them to the next step of learning. In this case it is extremely important for distance course content designers to build motivational features into the course activities and materials. At the same time distance learning students must assume greater responsibility for their own motivation and discipline, particularly in asynchronous, independent study-type programs where students have little direct contact with the teacher or classmates. This self-supporting strategy is vital for the maintenance of motivation and determination.

*Time constraints* – Looking first at the situation of learners, time has always been important consideration, because individuals who take up distance learning programs are usually part-time learners who need to combine education with their work schedule. However, students from geographically scattered areas registered in the same distance course program often face the problem of time different zones as regards participation in online sessions. Consequently, it results in absenteeism and decline in motivation. On the other hand, students complain about the amount of time they need to spend especially in the first few weeks of a course, familiarizing themselves with activities, requirements and opportunities available to them. Particularly, browsing the web, interacting in computer conferences and working in groups online are time-consuming.

*Cultural and linguistic differences* – Distance learning programs often involve participants from widely scattered geographic areas. Consequently, instruction originally designed for just one cultural or linguistic group may be delivered to learners from very different backgrounds. Distance educators need to be sensitive to such differences and anticipate the need for linguistic and cultural adjustments in the course content or delivery system. Accordingly, it is highly recommended to incorporate multiple cultural per-

spectives in an eclectic paradigm so that students from different cultures can be accommodated.

*Collaborative team work* – In traditional classrooms teachers work mainly on their own. In distance learning programs, however, course development and delivery is usually such a large, complex task that a team of workers is required. These team members fulfill diverse roles, including content expert, instructional designer, editor, media specialist, course producer, computer technician, telephone specialist, camera operator and graphic artist. When teamwork becomes a necessity, teachers no longer have autonomy or sole responsibility for instruction.

*Evaluation* – The change in the context of course delivery in distance language learning results in the elaboration of new evaluation strategies. The problem is how to evaluate students fairly, while holding them to on-campus course objectives and standards. Thus, evaluating students in distance learning programs is far more complicated as regards the maintenance of test security and effectiveness. To put it another way, distance education mode differs in many ways from face-to-face education and must have its own evaluation criteria.

To get back to the point, in this paper the lack of social interactions in distance language learning environment will be brought into focus and possible ways to develop interpersonal relations in the virtual learning context will be suggested.

## Interaction Development in a Virtual Language Learning Context

In order to examine the problem of lack of oral and visual interaction in distance language learning, it is important to first look at what interaction entails, especially at a time when computer mediated communication (CMC) is gaining importance. Accepting the relationship model between learner-teacher, learner-learner, learner-content and learner-interface, the following possible ways towards the development of interaction in computer-based language learning are suggested.

1. **Feedback provision not only by teachers but also by peers.** Feedback plays a crucial role for distance language learners, not only as a response to their performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation to continue. Within a classroom environment, language learners can make some judgments about progress as they have access to the responses of others, classroom interactions and to ongoing monitoring and feedback from the teacher. These elements are not so readily available in distance learning so students look to written feedback to gain a sense of their overall competence. Feedback is also an important part of the ongoing teacher-learner relationship as it contributes to figuring out how the learner sees the role of the teacher and indicates the extent to which the teacher is prepared to provide individual support. However instrumental feedback can create a dialogue not only between the learner and the teacher, but also between learners themselves. Maija Tammelin, lecturer of English Business Communication in Helsinki School of Economics has made considerable research in this area. In order to enhance interaction in virtual learning environment she uses a peer feedback system in which the students are in small online groups of three or four and comment on each other's reac-

tion to paper assignments. On their final paper they also get comments from at least one student reviewer. This seems to have an uplifting on the quality of the students' performances. On the other hand it more or less replaces the interaction between peers when they get informed about each other's performance level in real teaching environment.

2. **Encouraging collaborative preparation for the online lessons.** This method is mostly suitable for videoconferencing sessions. Students can prepare collaboratively for the videoconferences by exchanging messages in their online course platform. This collaborative preparation places the focus more on the students' collaborative effort rather than individual performances. A considerable body of research has demonstrated that despite the lack of a statistically significant difference between online and face-to-face students' academic achievements, the online students show a certain kind of isolation or disconnectedness from their instructors and fellow students. On the other hand online students face the challenge of strong sense of self-discipline to get ready for online lessons. Thus, collaborative preparation for online course delivery can help the students get together and overcome the above-mentioned challenges to a certain extent.

3. **Incorporating video-recorded exercises in the course content.** Obviously, the absence of visual cues – such as nods, gestures, eye contact and body language in general – presents a very real challenge within distance language learning environment. The loss of social and contextual cues, which are an integral part in face-to-face interaction, can have a negative impact on learners' disposition to come up with a speech. In order to fill this gap it is highly recommended to give prevalence to video-recorded speaking tasks. For example, assessable speaking tasks can be designed in such a way that they require the use of videoconferencing tools to cooperate and communicate among learners. Advanced learners can be encouraged to use videoconferencing to complete role-plays among themselves or with a native speaker. Students can videotape their videoconferencing activities and send the videotapes to the instructor for grading. At the same time, videoconferencing can help the distance learners build a learning community - an essential social environment for effective language learning.

4. **Creating students' profiles.** One of the contributing factors to the development of interaction between peers is acquainting them with one another. The educator can monitor the exchange of photos, e-mail addresses and personal information among students. Equally important, it will enable the participants to address each other by names and will enhance the sense of familiarity.

5. **Implementing the "neighborhood system".** Distance learning programs often involve participants from remote geographic areas. As a result, the same distance course content may be delivered to participants with totally different cultural background. In this case, an effective method to generate intrigue in distance education context and to meet the cultural constraint is to separate the students into "neighborhoods" according to their geographical location. This way as representatives of their countries students can use their traditional and cultural backgrounds to communicate

with each other. Namely, special tables should be designed in web-pages to leave comments on customs, holydays and interesting facts about students' countries.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, distance language learning proves to play a crucial role in global educational provision. Specifically, the accessibility and flexibility are key factors that matter in the choice between campus-based and distance education. While the distance learning mode offers wide-ranging advantages, it also presents some challenges for both educators and learners. A major challenge for today's online instructors involves creating a consistent level of interaction that fosters academic learning and cultivates a community atmosphere. This will require developing strategies that provide students the opportunity to interact with one another in a safe and motivating environment.

This article investigated the main challenges of distance language learning context focusing on the problem of social interaction. The purpose of the article was twofold. Based on the observation of four types of interaction and the role of each of them in the effectiveness of distance language learning, it also analyzed some possible methods that would contribute to fostering dynamic interaction in a distance language classes. In this respect, important limitations of the distance learning context are:
- the lack of social contact with peers and the instructor;
- lack of access to regular classroom interactions that can structure and support the learning process by means of providing an occasion to clarify expectations, to gain real-time feedback and to correct misconceptions;
- fewer opportunities to share perceptions through informal contacts and for incidental learning.

While distance language courses may lack valuable face to face interaction, they do provide viable alternatives to learners that are geographically isolated or need flexible learning environments. In this regard, the key point to the interaction development is creating a familiar learning environment through the implementation of peer feedback system and collaborative preparation for ongoing sessions. This way the participants will also overcome the barrier of anonymity that is disruptive to normal learning environment. The integration of video recorded tasks into the course content would be especially useful in asynchronous teaching mode in order to enhance listening and speaking skills and to replace the gap of interaction to some extent.

In conclusion, quality distance language learning requires careful attention to the course content design, selection of appropriate delivery technology and focus on student learning outcomes. If these factors are considered, distance language courses appear to hold promise for providing students with comprehensible input and output.

**References:**

1. Cohen, D.A. (1990) *Language Learning. Insights for Learners, Teachers and Researchers.* New York: Newbury House.

2. White, C. (2003) *Language Learning in Distance Education*. Cambridge: Prentice-Hall.
3. (2009) *Journal for Education in the Built Environment*. Vol. 4., Issue 1. Available at: <http://journals.heacademy.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.11120/jebe.2009.04010001> [Accessed June 2013].
4. Long, M. (1996) *Interaction Hypothesis*. San Diego: Academic Press.
5. Wolfson, N. (1989) *Perspectives. Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. Philadelphia: New House Publishers.
6. Henrichsen, E. (2001) *Distance-Learning Programs*. USA: Kirby Lithographic Company.

## Օտար լեզվի առցանց ուսուցման դեպքում սոցիալական շփման խնդիրը

Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրված են օտար լեզվի առցանց ուսուցման հիմնական մարտահրավերները՝ հատկապես շեշտադրելով առցանց կրթություն ստացող սովորողների միջև սոցիալական շփման սահմանափակ բնույթը և դրա անմիջական ազդեցությունը օտար լեզվի ուսուցման արդյունավետության վրա: Հոդվածում ներկայացված են մեթոդներ, որոնք առավելագույն կերպով նպաստում են առցանց ուսուցման դեպքում սովորողների միջև սոցիալական շփման բարձրացմանն ու իրական լսարանային կոլորիտի ստեղծմանը:

## Проблема социального общения при онлайн-обучении иностранному языку

В статье исследуются основные проблемы в онлайн-обучении иностранному языку. Особое внимание уделяется студентам, получающим онлайн-образование в условиях ограниченного социального общения, и его прямому воздействию на эффективность обучения иностранному языку. В конце статьи представлены методы, максимально способствующие онлайн-обучению, направленные на повышение качества социального взаимодействия между учащимися и создание аудиторной обстабовки.