

Teaching Business English for Distance Learning Students – Challenges, Problems and Potential Solutions

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Abstract: Distance learning has become a type of learning which is increasingly preferred by students both in bachelor and master programs at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, mainly due to economic reasons which force young people to start working immediately after finishing high-school. However, distance learning is also a solution for middle-aged people who graduated different universities in their youth, but have professions which are no longer requested on the job market. As the spectrum of distance learning students is so heterogeneous from different points of view such as age or professional background, teaching English to such students has encountered a number of challenges and problems that we have been trying to cope with so far. In order to identify these problems, we have made a survey among distance learning students from our faculty by using questionnaires and guided interviews. We have also made a summary of the issues identified in our teaching experience and we have talked to colleagues who are in the same situation in order to discover the common points. The paper will present the results of this investigation and the solutions we propose, solutions which are based on our 10 year-experience in teaching distance learning students as well as on the review of specialized literature in this area.

Key Words: distance learning, Business English, on-line platform, age, experience

Introduction

Distance learning – a general approach

Distance learning is a generic term that includes the range of teaching/learning strategies largely referred as correspondence education, correspondence study, home study, independent study, distance learning, computer-assisted learning, on-line learning, distance education. Related terms such as open learning, nontraditional studies, off-campus learning also appear in literature. Distance learning has existed for more than 100 years in the more developed regions and for one generation in the developing countries.

According to Berg (2002), the main elements which characterize distance learning are:

- Physical separation between teacher and learner
- Administration by an educational institution
- Frequent use of different media
- Synchronous and asynchronous communication between teacher and learner
- Often a focus on the non-traditional learner.

The history of distance learning goes as back as the 19th century, for example in the USA, where correspondence courses in the guided reading of the Bible or courses in Hebrew already existed. Hence derived the well-known Chautauqua courses and the first university practising this type of learning, which was recognized in 1883. Historically speaking, one can distinguish the following levels in the evolution of distance learning (Berg, 2002):

Level one (between 1880-1960) may be called *passive distance learning* as there was no opportunity for the learner to interact with the instructor in real time. The materials used were mostly printed and later there were also audio materials and video tapes. This is also called *asynchronous distance learning*.

Level two (between 1960-1990) is considered *passive to moderately active distance learning*. Distance learning became *synchronous* in this period as the learner and the instructor could interact in real time. The means used both for studying and interaction were two-way audio teletraining, computer-based training, CD, PC, electronic mail, audio-video transmissions. It is clear that the technological development led to the shift from asynchronous distance learning to synchronous distance learning, making it possible for the teacher and the learner to communicate more easily and contributing to the development and improvement of teaching-learning methods and materials.

Level 3 (since 1990 until now) is *highly interactive*. Teachers and learners are using hybrid environments that combine in one virtual classroom elements of all distance learning technologies previously described plus the Internet and WWW.

Benefiting from all the technological developments in the field of education and not only, distance learning has proved to be an effective and efficient type of learning encompassing a large range of advantages. Among these advantages we can mention:

- Quality of learning is as good or even better than in traditional learning
- Students are highly motivated
- Instructors are better prepared and organized
- Instructional resources are enhanced
- Collaborative teaching is encouraged
- It has not resulted in replacing the teachers.

These advantages could be seen easily by applying the ARCS model (Attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction model) validated in 1983, a model which has suffered changes and has been constantly adapted to the new requirements and the new technologies that have appeared so far. Whether we apply the model or not, it is obvious that open and distance learning has the potential of generating new patterns of teaching and learning. Linked as it is with the evolution of technology, it offers the promise of developing new ways to address learning needs and creating new patterns of information access and application. It can contribute to innovation in education and have effects beyond the realm of education. It may offer answers to education challenges as well. This is also the purpose of our study, i.e. to identify and deal with the challenges encountered when teaching Business English to distance learning students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration from Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Distance learning at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

Distance learning has a long tradition at the Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca, Romania, although it is not a type of learning used by all the faculties within the university. The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration has used distance learning for more than 20 years, even during the communist period. Of course, during that time, the curriculum was different as well as structure and requirements. Distance learning education has suffered a number of changes especially after Romania joined the European Union. Before that, distance learning at bachelor level meant 5 years (10 semesters) or 4 years (8 semesters). According to the Bologna system, the number of study years has been reduced to 3. However, master programs have been added which incorporate another 2 years.

The curriculum for distance learning programs is the same like the one for full-time learning. Students meet the teachers twice a semester and the meetings usually take 4 hours each or even more, depending on the subject in question. The course syllabus is available both on-line, on the distance learning platform especially created on the faculty website and in a printed version students may get for free. Communication with teachers most often takes place through e-mail or through the on-line platform or the teacher's personal blog or website.

Among the compulsory courses, both for full-time and distance learning students at bachelor level, we will find "Modern Language in Business" (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian) during the first four semesters and "The Language of Business Communication" (the same foreign languages) for semesters 5 and 6. At the master programs the curriculum stipulates a "Course in Intercultural Business Communication" (English or French) for semester 1 and "Modern Language in Business – second foreign language" (for semesters 2 and 3). It is obvious that we place great emphasis on the study of foreign languages in the academic environment, which is meant to answer to the current requirements on the job market and help our future graduates get better jobs in multinational companies in our country or abroad.

The curriculum for foreign languages courses is the same both for full-time and distance learning students. The major topics for the first 4 semesters refer to general business topics such as: recruitment, business ethics, management, finance and accounting, insurance, banking or business travel. The specialized vocabulary is accompanied by a revision of grammar items and all kinds of exercises testing the four basic skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. In the third year the emphasis is on the language of business communication; the main topics include oral and written communication, i.e. presentations, meetings, negotiations, writing business letters, reports or proposals. At the end of the third year, students are supposed to get a certificate that will show their competence in a foreign language at B2 level. They may take an international exam such as CAE or BEC Higher or they may choose the certificate offered by our university, LINGUA, which is similar to Cambridge in many respects, but it has a validity period of only 2 years and it does not have such a large international acknowledgement.

We have been teaching Business English practice courses for more than 10 years both to full-time and distance learning students. We have noticed that there are special problems that distance learning students encounter in comparison with full-time students when it comes to the study of foreign languages. In order to identify and solve these problems we made the following research.

Methodology

This study was designed mostly as a qualitative research involving focus groups, guided interviews, discussions and a questionnaire based predominantly on open questions. The purpose of the research was to find out what special problems teaching and learning Business English in the form of distance learning encompass from the students' and from the teachers' perspective. It is definitely a study which refers to the particular case of our faculty and the findings cannot be generalized. However, we believe that colleagues teaching languages at other universities may have the same problems and they will find our research useful for their activity.

Sampling and data analysis

We led a group discussion with 4 of our colleagues who teach modern languages at distance learning. Together with us, we were 6 teachers sharing the same experience; 3 of us have been teaching for around 10 years or less and the other 3 have more than 15 years of practice in the area. We all have been dealing with distance learning for more than 10 years. Four of the participants were female and the others were male. Four of us teach English, one teaches French and one German.

Regarding the sampling of the students' group, we led a focus group with six students from the second and third year, distance learning, who expressed their availability to participate in this activity by e-mail as a response to a request we made on-line on the students' mail group. 2 participants were male and 4 were female; 3 have ages between 20 and 30 and the others between 31 and 50. The discussion took around one hour and it was recorded with the participants' agreement.

We also built a questionnaire with several open questions (see Appendix 1) which were similar to those used in the focus group. The questionnaire was distributed to around 100 students from the second and third year, distance learning, either directly, after the course or by e-mail. 73% of the respondents were female and 27% were male. As for age, 55% were between 20-30 years old, 27% had ages between 31- and 40 and 18% were between 41-50.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' opinions

In this part of the study, we discussed with our colleagues who teach distance learning courses in foreign languages (English, French, German) at bachelor and master level. The first problem we all have encountered in our activity is *the discrepancy between the students' foreign language level and the level requested by the syllabus and the assessment system*. Theoretically speaking, students should have the B1 level in a foreign language when they start university, as this is the level they are tested at when they graduate high-school and take their baccalaureate exam. This works for students who are full-time learners; however, distance learners are not always recent high-school graduates. They may have graduated high-school a few years before and meanwhile they may have also taken another academic degree; some of them may have even graduated high-school 20 years ago. This is why they do not have the requested level (B1) and they cannot cope with the degree of difficulty in the syllabus and in the assessment. Even worse, some of them may have never studied

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English or French or German, but only Russian (as it is the case with older students who graduated high-school before the Revolution from 1989) and they would need a course for beginners.

Another problem was *the design of the course syllabus*. There is a standard design for the course syllabus at distance learning for all subjects, regarding the structure and the number of modules and the number of pages. We all consider that this standard is not suitable for the teaching of foreign languages because it does not allow us to introduce all the types of exercises that we need and a structure which is good for Maths or Management cannot be fully applied to a foreign language course syllabus.

The third problem which was identified during the discussion with our colleagues refers to the *limited number of course hours* students have during one semester. 8 hours may be enough to summarize issues dealing with economics but it is certainly not enough for teaching business English or any other foreign language. In addition to the reduced number of hours, another problem is *the large number of students* who attend the courses (over 50 or even over 100) which makes it almost impossible for the teacher to use a lot of interactive methods or perform communicative activities which are essential in the study of a foreign language.

Regarding *the on-line platform*, teachers complained that they could not use it properly, which is mainly the fault of the IT people who were still working on details. Access to the platform is still quite restricted, teachers can use it just to post materials or grades and they cannot have a direct communication with the students through the platform. In the future, it is considered that the platform will be improved and this communication will be possible.

The solutions our colleagues proposed are the following:

- The curriculum for distance learning language courses should be adapted to current needs; several groups should be created starting with A1 level so that students would have the opportunity of studying at the level which is suitable for them;
- Consequently, the course syllabus should be changed; there should be a different course syllabus for each level, starting with A1 up to B2;
- More teachers should be involved in distance learning and the number of course hours should be increased up to, at least, 14 hours per semester which means half of the number of classes full-time students have;
- The on-line platform should be improved so that teachers and students could communicate directly and more often.

Students' opinions

Both the focus group question guide and the questionnaire we used referred to the study of Business English as a distance learning course and the same major issues were addressed by both research methods. We started with a few general questions about the distance learning system from our faculty and then we focused on the problems students had encountered in the study of Business English.

We were interested in finding out why students chose distance learning instead of full-time learning since tuition fees are the same. The majority of them, no matter their age, said that they preferred to work in order to be able to pay for their studies and that their work places were in their home towns, at a distance of at least 30 km (the closest) up to 400 km (the farthest). People over 30 also mentioned the fact that they had a family and children and distance learning is a better solution for them although they live in Cluj-Napoca. 33% of the students who were interviewed said that they had already graduated another faculty and they were currently studying economics because of their job requirements or because their former qualifications were no longer needed on the job market and they wanted to find a better job. The students in this situation are all over 30 or even over 40.

Another question referred to the frequency with which students used the on-line platform. The majority answered that they used the platform almost weekly in order to find out information about the timetable, the exams or to download course syllabi. Nevertheless, they complained that the platform had not been working very well and they wished it could be used more often and in a more effective way.

Students were required to enumerate the qualities they thought a professor teaching distance learning students should have in comparison with one teaching full-time students. They said that such a professor should be very concise and able to select the most important information; he/she should focus on practical aspects and have an interactive approach. They also added that the professor should show availability to cooperate with students more often, he/she should be patient, understanding and show respect towards his/her students who,

sometimes, could be older than he/she is. The interviewed students consider that assessment for distance-learning students should be different from the assessment of full-time students.

Moving on to the part referring to language courses, all students said they considered that it is necessary to study a foreign language at university and English would be the most useful. When asked about the problems they encountered in the study of Business English, most respondents enumerated the following:

- The level imposed by the course syllabus is too high compared to the real level of the students (this applies particularly to students over 35 who graduated high-school a long time ago and do not have the necessary background knowledge in English);
- The number of course hours is not enough for the study of a foreign language;
- The lack of audio materials, listening and speaking activities;
- Many students admitted they had problems with grammar and verbal tenses in particular;
- The majority admitted it was quite difficult to learn a foreign language on their own.

Students were also required to suggest solutions to the problems they enumerated. They proposed the following actions to be taken:

- Students should be divided in groups according to their level (from beginners to upper-intermediate) and each group should have a different course syllabus;
- The course syllabus should be accompanied by a CD with listening drills or such drills should be made available on the platform;
- The course syllabus should contain more grammar exercises and, if this is not possible, supplementary exercises should be posted on the platform so that students could work individually and receive on-line feedback from the teachers;
- The number of face-to-face meetings should increase;
- The on-line platform should provide the means for direct interaction between the teacher and the students at least once a week.

Conclusions and Recommendations

By summarizing the problems identified by the teachers and by the students, we can easily see that there are common issues. These issues refer to:

- The level at which Business English/other foreign language courses should be taught and the necessity of adapting the curriculum and the course syllabus to the real level of the students and to their needs;
- The limited number of face-to-face meetings during the semester;
- The necessity of improving the on-line platform in such a way as to facilitate the use of audio materials and better communication between teacher and learner.

We have gathered the suggestions both teachers and students made and we have designed a set of recommendations to be considered for the improvement of language teaching for distance learning students.

It is clear that the existing system is not working very well and changes are needed. To start with, students should be divided in groups based on their level of foreign language knowledge. Although necessary, this idea could be very difficult to put in practice. The main reason is the impossibility of testing the students at the beginning of the academic year in order to assess their real level and decide on how many groups we have to create. A solution might be the students' registration on the on-line platform directly in the group they consider suitable for them. However, as this would be based on students' personal assessment, the degree of honesty and objectivity is questionable. Students may decide to attend a course which is below their level in order to make things easier for them and get better grades. At the same time, more groups will need more teachers and different course syllabi and this will take time and cannot be implemented in the near future. The main point stays that when students graduate, they are supposed to have the B2 level and they may not reach this level if they start from A1 level in the first year.

It is difficult to change the existing system but we can do certain things to improve it. Our suggestion is *team (or pair) teaching*. It means that a teacher should not work on his/her own with distance learning students, but have a colleague or an assistant to help him/her. Practically, this means that one of the teachers will actually teach the course and meet the students during the semester and the other one will keep in touch with students through the on-line platform and meet them during office hours. The course syllabus will be the same for all students, however the assistant will deal more with the students who have difficulties in coping with the level and the requirements imposed by the course curriculum and syllabus. The assistant will have a certain number of

office hours when he/she can meet the students and also a certain number of teaching hours on the platform, according to a schedule students will be informed about.

The communication through the on-line platform will be essential in such a system. This is why we need to enhance the collaboration between the IT department and the department of modern languages. By using their knowledge and the most recent techniques in the field, our colleagues from the IT department should facilitate the access on the platform both for the student and for the teacher and create an electronic communication system which will allow the student to post questions on the platform or do exercises and the teacher to be notified and answer in real time, according to an established schedule or correct the mistakes in the student's homework and add supplementary exercises on the platform. In this way, students who do not have the necessary level will work more and get feedback and they will be helped to improve their skills and fill in the knowledge gaps they may have. The use of the platform will make this cooperation between teacher and learner much easier than through e-mail or office hours, given the fact that the majority of the distance learning students do not live in the university home town. Some audio materials with corresponding exercises could be posted on the platform so that students would develop listening skills as well or a CD could be attached to the course syllabus (in the printed version) and the stuff on the CD should also be available on-line. This means that the course syllabus should contain listening exercises.

A problem which still stays in place is the development of speaking skills. Speaking activities are difficult to develop with a large number of students and in a limited number of classes. A possibility would be the increase of the number of course hours from 8 per semester to at least 14. This proposal should be submitted to the approval of the university board and if approved, then the teacher should try to introduce more speaking activities, at least group work or pair work, depending on the number of students who participate in the course.

In this study we have tried to identify particular teaching and learning issues we and our distance learning students are confronted with. It is probable that colleagues teaching at other universities in our country or abroad, especially in Eastern Europe, would encounter the same problems. The solutions we have proposed may work not only for foreign languages, but also for other distance learning courses. At the same time, pair or team teaching could be used for traditional language classes and especially for groups of learners who have special difficulties because of different causes such as age, cultural background or different types of disabilities. We are open to any other recommendations colleagues with similar experiences could make and we hope that our ideas will be implemented in the near future.

Appendix 1

Interview/questionnaire guide

Instructions: please provide comprehensive and precise answers to the open questions below and circle your situation where it is the case. Your answers will be used for research purposes and for improving the quality of distance learning education in our faculty. You had been informed about these purposes before you agreed to take part in the survey. Your answers will be confidential and anonymous. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Why did you choose distance learning education for completing your studies?
2. Do you use the distance learning on-line platform? If so, how often and to which purpose?
3. Which qualities do you think a professor teaching distance learning students should have in comparison with a professor teaching full-time students?
4. Do you consider it necessary to study a foreign language during faculty?

YES

NO

5. Which problems have you encountered in the study of Business English as a distance learning course?
6. Which solutions do you suggest to these problems?
7. Which is your opinion about the syllabus for the Business English course?

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May 5-7 2011 Sarajevo*

8. Would you like to communicate with your English teacher through the on-line platform? If so, how often?
9. Did you graduate another form of higher education before the one you are currently attending?
- YES NO
10. Your age
11. Your sex F M
12. Your place of permanent residence

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