

New Insights into Distance Language Learning

Sajad Faramarzi *

Young Researchers and Elite Club, Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran

Atefeh Elekaei

Young Researchers and Elite Club, Qazvin Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran

Mansour Koosha

Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan branch, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract

Distance language learning provides an excellent opportunity for language learners to receive instruction in an adaptable environment. This type of pedagogy offers a flexible time management system for students under the pressure of shaping business and/or life responsibilities. By the emergence of new technological advances, research on distance language learning has predominantly been focused on how new technologies can affect distance education. It is equally important to monitor the change of direction in distance language learning research. Therefore, investigating major potential areas of research, acknowledging the current methodologies, finding the possible gaps in previous works, and proposing solutions to remove the barriers in this field are of prime importance. In this study, major related works in distance language learning were particularly highlighted by underscoring their significant results. Furthermore, some recommendations were offered for future studies which enable researchers to have a broader view to this type of language learning system.

Keywords: distance education, distance language learning, E-learning, ubiquitous learning, online learning, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a type of learning system for students who are not physically available as they are in traditional classes. Sometimes “Hybrid” learning is allotted to a kind of distance program in which learners have to be available online at a certain time. This type of learning system is heavily dependent on technological advancements. Thus, in order to maximize the amount of participation, a new range of emerging technologies are used and because of this reason, E-learning is also attributed to this kind of instruction. The original philosophy behind distance education is to provide high quality

education for people who do not have access to the traditional classes because of their family or vocational issues (Kett, 1994).

By the development of new technologies, distance education has shown itself as an undeniable part of education in general and language learning in particular. The way distance education is implemented can be divided into two categories of synchronous and asynchronous learning with each category having its own advantages. In synchronous language learning, all participants are simultaneously, though not in a same location, connected to each other via a shared network. As an example, this approach can be put into practice by video conferencing and live instructional programs online and on air. Also called “paced model of distance learning”, the synchronous type of education is the most common way of instructional technology. Moreover, it implies a real sense of being inside a class as each participant can dynamically engage in the learning/teaching process. Simultaneous education fosters cooperative activities to get the projects done on time and to form student communities.

Asynchronous instruction, on the other hand, offers the opportunity of benefitting the classroom at any time regardless of time restrictions. Perfect example is podcasting in which students can download the recorded materials and use them in their convenient time. Students can listen to/watch the professors’ lectures as much as needed. This clearly offers troubleshooting the potential problems since students can review the problematic areas as much as needed. (McKinney, Dyck, & Luber, 2009; Muppala & Kong, 2007; Chester, Buntine, Hammond, & Atkinson, 2011). This type of learning has its own benefits as well. Flexibility in timetable and the consistency in practice are the major advantages of asynchronous distance learning.

Likewise, Burns (2012) mentioned a third mode of delivery which is “the blended learning”. Blended learning, a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning, offers the advantages of both traditional campus-based classes and the more distance-based ones. Nunan (1999) mentioned that a blended mixture of print, online, and offline resources can offer greater flexibility for distance and online education. Accordingly, an integration of web-based technologies can easily boost the capabilities of distance education.

A typical distance language learning course is proposed by Curtis, Duchastel, and Radic (1999) as having 6 major components: distance nature, flexible studying hours, multimedia involvement, interacting with others, personalized learning experience, and integrative nature. By the advent of innovative high-tech advances, distance language learning has undergone a huge metamorphosis of drastic change and reformation. Notwithstanding, this is a rich area which needs a thorough understanding of its potentials.

Thus, in this article, different modes of delivering distance language learning specifically through emerging technologies are investigated by giving examples from previous research projects. The major purpose of this research is to outline a comprehensive insight into this mode of pedagogy in order to understand its potentials, realizing the

possible gaps in previous works, and proposing conceivable recommendations for future studies.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Distance education and more particularly distance language learning offers a flexible time management system for students under the pressure of organizing business and/or life responsibilities (Oblinger, 2000). Moreover, the idea of receiving instruction from accredited universities and educational organizations has been made possible with distance language learning without being personally available. More importantly, the idea of paying an enormous amount of money for any educational program has always proved to be a barrier for many students. Distance language learning has changed the educational system to be a cost-effective approach in which it cuts down many of students' expenses such as transportation costs and buying textbooks.

The quality of instruction is another significant issue. Students can easily work on their weak points by reviewing the recorded materials of every session. This kind of troubleshooting technique is not available in traditional classes because in many regular classes students are not allowed to record the class lectures (Muppala and Kong, 2007). Furthermore, Distance language learning provides equal opportunities for all students regardless of their sex, race, disabilities, social status, and learning habits. It removes the hurdle of "I can't learn anymore" and instead, it supports the notion of "You can still learn". It is, moreover, interesting to note that distance language learning provides an opportunity for students to connect with teachers from around the world as part of a virtual pedagogical system. It also obviated the necessity of necessarily being present inside a real class. In fact, distance language learning system made it possible for students to apply for a specific course which might not be possible to attend; either it is not possible for students to participate in the class or there is no expert teacher for the required course. Therefore, understanding the major potential areas in this means of education is of prime importance to understand the gaps, to improve the teaching conditions, to facilitate the teaching/learning process, and to remove the barriers. Accordingly, in this article, the researchers tried to accentuate the previously discussed studies first; and some potential areas of research are recommended afterwards.

METHODOLOGY AND RATIONALE

In this article, a comprehensive approach has been considered by choosing different articles and books related to diverse aspects of distance language learning by categorizing each issue in different domains. It is necessary to understand different approaches in this field by reviewing the previous works and analyzing their points of emphasis. Afterwards, some recommendations have been put forward for avid readers in this field of study to have a better insight into doing research about the potential gaps which are remained to be argued in detail. In order to do so, the literature review is fully discussed in section two, which is labeled as 'lessons from the past'. In this section, nearly all state of the art attempts in the field of distance language learning are discussed in detail. After reviewing the pioneering and the most important works from

the past, new recommendations are suggested in section three, labelled as 'new directions'. The purpose of this section is to highlight the significance of potential areas of research. It is attempted to relate the new recommendations with previous works which are discussed in the next section.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Learner needs in distance education

From 1930s to 1950s, radio was used as a medium to broadcast live classroom materials for many students in the United States. By the advent of high speed internet connection, the idea of using this technology prevailed the previous systems such as radio and TV. For the success of any distance language learning program, it is necessary to understand and meet students' needs. Holmberg (1986) mentioned that distance learning can be effective in motivating students if its objectives are compatible with the learner needs. The idea of analyzing students' needs are so important since every institution has to make sure whether its objectives are fulfilled. In one study, Sampson (2003) investigated the significant needs of learners in a distance education program. In his research, he found that students were greatly satisfied with the allotted time in the distance learning program, module selection and the received feedback. However, there still remained some questions concerning the amount of student support and their access to library materials.

Wang (2004) examined the effect of videoconferencing as a synchronous tool to support distance education. No interaction between learners and education providers in distance learning caused the deterioration of oral skills. Because of this reason, there has always been a gap between the learners and education providers. Likewise, it is found that the provision of videoconferencing in distance language learning will result in enhancing the amount of oral and visual interactions. There is, however, an argument concerning the type of visual and/or oral modalities of using Computer Mediated Connection CMC. Cognitively, it was argued that the utilization of video materials will result in enhancing the negotiation of meaning among learners (Chun and Plass, 2000). In a similar study, Wang (2006) revealed that negotiation of meaning through videoconferencing system of distance language learning has the potential to facilitate second language acquisition. Also, Toyoda and Harrison (2002) found that network-based communication will result in triggering the negotiation of meaning even if students were not assigned to do any specific task. Moreover implementing visual materials through computer mediated communication can assist learners to overcome the available isolation in distance learning and instead, help construct an educational community between learners (Bloomfield, 2000; Hampel & Hauck, 2004). Additionally, the positive effects of computer mediated communication as a way to improve the negotiation of meaning, the collaborative interaction between students, and problem solving exercises was underscored by Blake (2005); it was concluded that students have a lot of opportunities for focusing their attentions on the program which acts as a "glue" to maintain the interest to the subject without the physical presence.

Another device that has been used frequently in different programs of distance language learning is asynchronous videoconferencing system. Wang (2007) investigated the task design in a distance language learning supported by videoconferencing. By using a videoconferencing software named "*NetMeeting*", different aspects of task design such as its "practicality, language-learning potential, learner fit, authenticity, and its positive impact" were examined. In this article different issues were considered in detail. For example, by practicality, it meant the degree in which the videoconferencing device can support the task completion. Similarly, by language-learning potential, the amount of learner engagement and the extent of their improvement were taken into account. Additionally, difficulty level of the task should be made compatible with learners' level of proficiency. The issue of authenticity were regarded as the degree of correspondence between the videoconferencing activities and the activities in real life situations as well. Also, the adequacy of task types on motivating learners and enhancing their confidence is of paramount significance. It was found that there is an appropriate measure for *NetMeeting* videoconferencing instrument in supporting students, and students' proficiency level were improved rapidly during the experiment. Students could manifest the linguistic materials with more confidence and use the task contents in real life situations. The overall progress in students' proficiency along with the compatibility of the tasks with their authenticity confirms the adequacy of videoconferencing device in synchronous distance language learning. Likewise, Pearson et al. (2008) found comparable outcomes for speaking proficiency of three modes of classroom-based, distance and hybrid educations. In a similar study, Volle (2005) investigated different aspects of speaking proficiency in a distance Spanish language program. The results indicate that after comparing students' scores in articulation, accuracy, and fluency at the beginning of the experiment with the corresponding scores at the end of experiment which involved exchanging voice mails, oral proficiency scores were significantly improved.

In another study, Hampel and Hauck (2004) investigated the effectiveness of audio videoconferencing in online distance language learning programs of Open University. They considered some of the most important challenging issues in online learning programs; e.g., the design of the learning program, the training programs for teachers, and the extent of student support. A questionnaire regarding the application of the software named "*Lyceum*" was sent to the students and afterwards, the collected data was analyzed qualitatively. The results contribute to the positive effectiveness of audio video conferencing in distance learning. Through Synchronous audio conferencing, distance language learning is changed to a flexible and interactive environment in which there is more opportunity for negotiation of meaning and comprehensible input. However, students outlined a number of issues as the main obstacles of the online learning program. For instance, Voice distortion, loss of connection, and the non-appearance of the loudspeaker were some of the mentioned problems. As long as the integration of different modalities such as voice, video, text and links into videoconferencing system of distance language learning makes it more functional (Wang, 2006), more attention must be paid to train teachers (Blake, 2005). Other problems were manifested themselves due to the lack of different facilities that students

might have utilized such as the quality of the microphones and different internet service providers (ISPs). It is concluded that weaker students should be supported more in the program, and all students have to prepare topics of discussion before the class; otherwise, even the strongest and brightest students find the discussion cumbersome.

The other issue which has been extensively investigated in the studies of distance language learning is student's autonomy. White (2004) discussed the different ways in which distance language learning can foster autonomy in language learning. Through this kind of education, students have the opportunity to develop a particular cooperative environment which is not necessarily teacher-centered i.e. learners will develop new identities and beliefs in the new learning milieu. Students must therefore, be trained to adjust themselves with the new learning atmosphere and to make the best use of the available resources. However, White (2004) argued that learners' independence to manage their learning process and to make decisions about their education will result in a great opportunity for meaningful interaction between learners and teachers. Furthermore, White (2007) argued that teacher's identity in distance language learning should be particularly highlighted to underscore how different identities can affect the course results. Similarly, White (2009) focused on the role of learners in distance language learning system. It is assumed that learner-based learning experience in distance language learning is allotted to the idea of how learners construct the learning environment and negotiate meaning. As a result, each learner has to develop its own interface with the learning situation. In fact, the relationship between the learner and the learning context should be highlighted. The kind of course is similar for all learners but the kind of understanding that each learner receives is different.

The effect of distance language learning on learners' personalities, roles and their motivation was also emphasized in detail. Hurd (2006) argued that there seems to be an incompatibility between language learning as essentially a social experience and the remoteness nature of distance language learning. However, higher level of confidence is the result of learning at a distance as students have shown to be more motivated.

Podcasting in distance language learning

One of the devices that has the capability of facilitating the course of instruction in distance language learning is podcasting. Many researchers (e.g. Abdous, Camarena, & Facer, 2009; Abdous, Facer, & Yen 2012; Allan, 2007; Chan, Chen, & Dopel, 2011; Chester, Buntine, Hammond, & Atkinson, 2011; Chan, Chi, Chin, & Lin, 2011; Chi & Chan, 2011; O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007; Lazzari, 2009) have investigated the effect of podcasting on language learning. This instrument which offers excellent support for all educational and academic goals (Hargis and Wilson, 2005), can be implemented as a tool to upload and share recorded video materials, audio files, links, and softwares for all students benefiting from different modes of distance language learning. Moreover, podcasting device can compensate the absent session in any class either traditional or virtual because it provides an opportunity to listen and/or watch the recorded sessions (McCombs & Liu, 2007; Facer, Abdous, & Camarena, 2009). Nonetheless, it is a magnificent opportunity for learners to interact with each other by sharing their

opinions through leaving comments about each uploaded recording, providing feedback for them, and consequently, developing a critical thinking procedure (Perez et al., 2011). It is necessary for any means of education to evaluate students' attitudes, perceptions, and feelings towards it. Some researchers (e.g. Martin and Beckmann, 2011; O'Bryan, and Hegelheimer, 2007; Chester et al., 2011a; Ducate and Lomicka, 2009; Chan et al., 2011b) reported different students attitudes towards the use of podcasting technique. In many cases students held positive attitudes towards the implementation of podcasting technique into the distance language learning program. Higher level of academic self-efficacy were observed among students using podcasting comparing to those who did not. (Chester et al., 2011). Users of podcasting provided feedback about this technology and mentioned some reasons for using it. For instance, in many cases it was stated that podcasting can help them to revise the complicated materials for the exam. Furthermore, troubleshooting was considered as another major reason for using it especially during the exam season (Muppala and Kong, 2007). However, non-users of podcasting highlighted the fact that they still prefer traditional conventional classes; more specifically, they were quite confused not knowing how to use the files (Monk, Ozawa, & Thomas, 2006). It accentuates the role of training students in achieving the academic goals of podcasting in distance education. The way of podcasting delivery has also been a subject of extensive debate. In some studies (e.g. Amemiya, Hasegawa, Kaneko, Miyakoda, & Tsukahara, 2007) the use of vodcasting or videopodcasting was mentioned as a tool to improve vocabulary learning exercise. The vodcasting system proved to be successful in enhancing vocabulary knowledge. Similarly audioblogs, the way in which audio file are uploaded and shared between different learners, was investigated by some researchers (Hsu, Wang, and Comac, 2008) and it is believed that this kind of distance technology can be equally practicable to motivate students for more cooperative activities.

Mobile Assisted language learning in distance education

Mobile technology provides extensive support and maintenance for learners in distance language learning. In numerous studies (e.g. Amer, 2010; Anaraki, 2009; Anderson, Hwang, & Hsieh, 2008; Attewell, 2005; Begum, 2011; Bollen, Eimler & Hoppe, 2004; Cavus and Ibrahim, 2009; Chang, and Hsu, 2011; Chen; Demouy & KukulskaHulme, 2010; Fallahkhair, Pemberton & Griffiths, 2005; Nah, White & Sussex, 2008; Obari, Goda, Shimoyama & Kimura, 2008; Samuels, 2003; Shao, 2011; Shao, Crook & Koleva, 2007 ; Song and Fox, 2005) different aspects of language learning have been investigated by measuring different ways of utilizing mobile assisted language learning (MALL) in relation to distance learning.

For example, the use of Short messaging system or SMS has been particularly emphasized in many studies. The greater positive effect of introducing students with utilizing short messaging system in vocabulary retention is visible in many works (e.g. Alemi, Sarab , & Lari, 2012; Azabdaftari and Mozaheb, 2012; Butgereit, Botha & van Niekerk, 2010; Clarke, Keing, Lam & McNaught, 2008; Gutierrez-Colon, Gallardo Torrano, & Grova, 2012; Houser, Thornton, Yokoi & Yasuda, 2001; Kennedy and Levy,

2008; Levy and Kennedy, 2005). However, Derakhshan and Kaivanpanah (2011) and Lin and Yu (2012) found that there were no significant result from using SMS in enhancing the vocabulary level of language learners. Similar to Short Messaging System, Multimedia Messaging System or MMS has also been implemented in some projects (e.g. Choi and Jeong, 2010; City College Southampton, 2005) as a medium to foster connectivity and interaction among students.

Additionally, many researcher (e.g. Al-Jarf, 2012) investigated the use of mobile technology in improving students speaking skills in language classes. The students in the experimental groups who benefitted from mobile technology outperformed students in the control groups. Likewise, Ally, Schafer, Cheung, McGreal, and Tin (2007) and Baleghizadeh and Oladrostam (2010) examined the use of MALL in grammar training. It was found that students showed a moderate improvement in grammar and held positive attitudes towards using it. Some researchers (e.g. Al-Shehri, 2011a; Al-Shehri, 2011b; Petersen, Divitini, & Chabert, 2008;) found a greater contribution of MALL technology in organizing a contextualized network among students. It was found that students can reflect on each other's published posts online by leaving comments. They also appreciate getting in touch via virtual societies. In another study, Amer (2010) explored the role of mobile phones in internalizing idiomatic expressions. Surprisingly, there seemed to be a positive relationship between the higher scores in students' quizzes and their using mobile idiom learning program. In a related study, Motalebzadeh, Beh-Afarin, and Daliry Rad (2011) explored the magnificent effect of mobile learning technology through the medium of SMS on the retention of collocation among Iranian learners. Online Chatting has received equal attention among language researchers. Lai and Zhao (2006) for instance, found that the amount of noticing esp. learners' noticing their mistakes in online text-based chat is more than that of the face-to-face context.

Beside these innovations, the use of other social media e.g. Facebook and Twitter has been a focal point for research in this area. Borau, Ullrich, Feng, and Shen (2009), for example, studied the role of sending and receiving messages via Twitter on communicative and cultural competence of language learners. It was found that by producing messages in form of tweets, Twitter has an effective role in promoting communicative and cultural competence of students without being present individually. Equally, in a Korean study (Kim, Park, and Baek, 2011), twitter microblogging showed that students do it for different purposes. Likewise, this activity helps students to engage themselves in the teaching/learning atmosphere and maintain their interaction with other peers. Indeed, Twitter is regarded as a tool to use English in an authentic environment (Kim, 2010) and to motivate students to involve in cultural exchange (Kim and Lim, 2010).

Another interesting area for research is the game-based cooperative language learning environment. In a study by Lin, Young, and Hung (2008), it is confirmed that a cooperative "web-enabled PDA-based scrabble game (WiCFG)" can motivate students to

learn second language English vocabulary by providing an opportunity for learners to discuss and share the words they have learnt.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Removing the barriers

In order to facilitate the process of distance language learning and to obtain optimum results, different instructional, psychological and logistic barriers must be removed. One of the problems is related to the use of technology itself i.e. how this kind of learning is implemented through the medium of technology should be taken into great consideration. It can be considered as a major hindering difficulty either because of lack of student training or defective devices (McCombs & Liu, 2007). Accordingly, the schools and universities accountable for executing distance language learning are responsible for providing the most appropriate resources and equipment (Stephens, 2007). For example, providing an accessible online library bank is of paramount significance (Sampson, 2003). In one study at Washington State Community College, most of the students ceased to participate in the distance education program because of having severe troubles with managing their time and learning the skills necessary to study. It is a reminder that school administrators should not be complacent about training students. They need to continuously monitor students' progress and the way students manage to continue. As far as learners are considered, they have to adopt themselves with the new learning situation by getting to know new potentials of distance language learning pedagogy (Rogers and Wolff 2000, Catterick 2001 and Kotter 2001).

There are some criticisms regarding the operation of distance language learning in schools and universities. Most of these negative remarks are specifically focused on the issue that distance education lacks regular face-to-face interaction as present in the traditional classes. By the introduction of technological expansions in contemporary emergent technologies of distance educations e.g. blogs, wikis, and online classes, it is not necessary to be cautious about the students' presence inside the traditional classes as most of the students use online technologies for just about every activity in their real lives.

Obviously distance education will not yield desirable outcomes for every major field of study. For instance, this does not obviate the mandatory patient-doctor interaction for the students who study medicine. However, distance language learning has all the potentials and capabilities to minimize the presence of students inside language classes. Students aiming to be engaged in distance language learning should be provided with clear and necessary instruction on how to make the best use of the online courses. Moreover, teachers are recommended to motivate students by raising students' awareness about the advantages of online language learning. It is also important to note that supplementary materials should be provided through the use of e-learning programs and websites that enable teachers to demonstrate different features like graphs, videos, and slides (Faramarzi and Bagheri, 2015). For the case of podcasting

which is an interactive way to share recorded audio/video files with students and receive feedback from students regarding the quality of instruction, teachers can stimulate students in a variety of different ways. Dale (2007) mentioned some techniques to encourage students to use podcasting system:

1. Engage the listeners by providing examples, photos and video materials. These features will enable learners to reflect on the podcasting materials.
2. Introduce it gradually to the learners. It might take some time to understand all potential areas of podcasting.
3. Use chapters to help learners understand different parts of the website.
4. Provide high quality audio and video materials.
5. Be cautious about the copyright
6. Provide technical supports to students who might have some problems using the podcast. (Cited in Faramarzi and Bagheri, 2015)

Maximizing the amount of interaction between teachers and students

As investigated by Strambi and Bouvet (2003), distance language learning system must be flexible enough to be compatible with different styles of students. Therefore, such a program will motivate students by providing a required authentic and interactive environment. The fact that distance education allows students to study without having direct contact with the teachers should not diminish the nature and the amount of interaction between teachers and students. For example, Aitsiselmi (1999) mentioned that communication technology does not eliminate the amount of classroom work but it acts as a catalyst to provide a better opportunity for students to improve their learning experience. Also Wang (2004) highlighted the significance of videoconferencing tools as a device to bolster synchronous learning; it is indisputably important to consider an outstanding nature of interaction in distance language learning. Likewise, Students need to be supported all the time to maintain a desirable progress rate. In order to minimize the gap stemmed from little interaction between teachers and students in distance language learning, different strategies such as videoconferencing should be implemented to establish a connection among learners, teachers, and context materials.

Obviously, this procedure is not without its problems which need to be taken into account. For evaluation of any computerized device different criteria must be highlighted meticulously:

1. User friendliness,
2. Audio and video quality,
3. Other features of pedagogical value,
4. Reliability,
5. And cost. (Wang, 2004).

Technical Support

One of the major issues in providing CMC materials in any distance learning system is user friendliness i.e. the kind of network should not be complicated for users to work with. This issue was previously mentioned in Hampel and Hauck (2004) that the environment should be “non- threatening, confidence building, and fun” Technical problems can always affect the quality and outcomes of distance language learning. Bad quality of sounds, loss of connectivity and faulty equipment are some of the problems which need to be obviated before starting any kind of assignment. The quality of audio and video files also affect students’ attitude towards the whole program and consequently plays a key role in motivating students. Whether the materials and devices underlie a pedagogical value, and whether its use is generalizable to different situation are of paramount importance as well. As Murray (2002) stated, more attention should be paid to the effectiveness of the outcomes of different computer mediated communication systems to distinguish the most practical ones.

Another obstacle is the cost of the programs which has to be made affordable for all students. This type of language learning offers a great opportunity for people living in developing countries who cannot afford real classes. They can benefit from high quality education with a much lower cost comparing to traditional ones. However, in many situations the price of providing internet connection and the proper materials can easily hamper many people to participate in distance education programs. Local and international foundations should be active enough to support and encourage students by financially assisting students in this regard.

CONCLUSION

This article has investigated the major areas of research in distance language learning by analyzing previous works and recommending potential areas of research for future studies. Since this is a huge area, understanding the barriers and the available gaps are really important to yield optimum results. Since this is totally a distinct type of education, there seems to be many issues and problems which need to be investigated.

Future studies can be particularly focused on a variety of different issues, e.g. implementing more user-friendly applications, providing better technical support, and facilitating the amount of peer interaction. For many students, distance language learning program, like any other new experience, can be stressful. Accordingly, more research is needed to focus on students’ anxiety and the ways to build their confidence. It is also a medium if instruction which needs a consciousness raising on behalf of teachers, parents, and school administrations. Those people involved in this kind of electronic learning should be clear about the objectives of the course. It is necessary to train teachers and students about the requirements and outcomes of the course.

More focus and attention is necessary to be put on the integration of different devices and materials such as the electronic ones. Investigating the effects of different applications through distance programs is also of paramount importance. Language

assessment in distance education is an issue which needs to be highlighted extensively. It is necessary to develop different computerized tests which result in more interaction between students and teachers. The issue of self-evaluation through the computerized testing is another issue which definitely help students and their parents to monitor an ongoing learning progress.

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