

# Language Functions and Distance Learning

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## **Abstract**

This article provides a critical assessment of distance learning as an alternative to face to face learning. It is argued in this article that language has got various functions and that these functions determine the language learner's attitude and social communication as well as the meanings of linguistic items. It further asserts that these functions can be attained only in the context that learner and teacher share the same time and place. In a distance learning situation, they may share the same time but not the same place.

***Keywords:** Function, Distance Learning, Basic Principle, Interpersonal, Textual, Expressive, Transactional*

## **What is Distance Learning?**

Distance learning can be traced from the early nineteenth century. The earliest form of distance learning presumably developed through correspondence courses in many countries. For instance, teaching English as a foreign language was carried out through radio until television became very popular. I am sure this was the accepted norm in many countries, particularly in Europe, until the 1950s when instructional radio and television became popular.

What is distance learning? It is open or exible learning to a certain extent. It is a program of study that consists of video printed or online materials, which allows students to study far from the premises where face to face teaching takes place.

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According to some educators, distance learning and distance education have been applied interchangeably by many different researchers to a great variety of programs, providers, audiences and media. Its hallmarks are the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time (Perraton 1988), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen, 1992), and the non-contiguous communication between student and teacher mediated by print or some form of technology (Kegan, 1986) It is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogical and industrial system designs that are effectively incorporated in delivering education to students who are not physically on -site to receive their education. The reason why these programs have recently become more popular is that the internet has become a reliable channel of tuition.

Distance learning/teaching has been widely used recently. Distance learning/teaching can be implemented very well for some subjects; unfortunately, it is rather difficult to say the same thing for language learning, no matter how sophisticated the technology employed for this purpose might be.

### **Basic Principles of Foreign Language Learning**

Learning a foreign language is a long and tedious process. In language learning and teaching the content of some concepts has recently changed and became enriched. One of them is the relationship between learning and teaching. In the past, teaching was more important than learning because the teacher was almost the only source of information. Recently language instructors and linguists have started to place greater emphasis on learning than on teaching because the increase in the number of sources of information has increased.

### **Learning is a Process, not a Product**

Since learning has got the priority over teaching, the entailment of this is that learning is a process rather than a product. This process calls for awareness, determination, willingness and motivation. In order to succeed in gaining competency, and as a result of it, uency and accuracy, one should be exposed to a variety of texts and develop different language skills. Furthermore, the language learner should be given the opportunity to have access to all types of resources as far as the target language is concerned. In order to establish reasonable communication, to be able to

interpret and comprehend the language functions and notions, s/he should have the ability to analyze a text and express himself/herself effectively. Therefore, we should aim to develop the basic skills of language learning.

### **Language Learning/Teaching Strategies**

Language learning/teaching is basically based on how we define language. We teach it in accordance with our definition of language. It is dangerous to generalize about approaches, methods or techniques in language teaching, for what is appropriate and stimulating for one group is not for another; a method successful for one teacher can be a failure for another. The most important thing in language learning/teaching is experience. One can learn while teaching because learning and teaching are mutually supportive. It is also difficult to recommend a particular method or technique for distance learning. As far as the nature of language is concerned, there are certain principles in language learning and teaching. As far as distance learning/teaching is concerned, the following points can critically be discussed:

### **Learning is More Important than Teaching**

Some concepts have changed in priority. In the past, teaching was important because a teacher was the only source of knowledge, whereas sources of knowledge are various nowadays and students can get information about any topic from different sources.

Learning is a process not a product; that is why it is important. This entails that the ultimate goal of a good lesson is not how well the instructor performs; it is whether or not the learners learn and how long the learning will last. In other words, the ultimate objective of a good lesson is to activate students. This goal can be attained in a face to face learning situation, but it is practically impossible to activate students as required in distance learning. In language learning interaction has got the ultimate importance. Language by nature is like complex machinery, and language teaching is correspondingly complex. This complex process should be realized in the presence of both parties, i.e. speaker and hearer (teacher and learner) in communication theory because language learning and teaching itself is basically communication.

In other words, if both components of communication share the same place and time, this complex process can be accomplished. In distance learning a teacher and learner might share the same time but not the same place. This means that communication cannot take place as required. Furthermore, different situations call for different methods and techniques as well as materials, different activities and strategies. This entails that the important measuring tool is that whatever method, material, etc. is used will enable students to activate in order to attain the desired goal, i.e. learning. In a face to face context the goal can be easily achieved by means of the rapport developed between a teacher and learner, but it is doubtful whether such a rapport can be developed in distance learning.

### **Language is Communication**

Along with the same place and time, communication requires a speaker, a hearer, a channel, a common code system and conventions and beliefs shared by the speaker and hearer. In a face to face context, communication takes place appropriately because both parties can use the same common code system, even the same channel. However, in distance learning this channel cannot be used as functionally and interactively as it is used in a face to face context. Since language itself is communication, it should be taught accordingly. Communicative teaching emphasizes that the goal of language teaching/learning is communicative competence. Communicative competence is not only knowing the language very well but also knowing how, when, where and with whom to use the language.

According to communicative teaching, language is not a collection of structures and grammar that you add to your knowledge. You can only possess it after prolonged effort. Furthermore, it is a natural human activity. Communicative teaching also emphasizes the processes of communication, such as using language appropriately in different types of situations; to perform different kinds of tasks, e.g. to solve puzzles, to get information etc.

The main purpose of communication is using the language to interact with other people for various reasons and also using the language to keep the social wheels turning. It requires teaching the language to express and understand different kinds of functions such as requesting, describing, expressing likes and dislikes, leave-taking, recommending, criticising,

complaining, etc. Language is not a string of words. It is a means of communication, and the most important thing in communication is to achieve language functions by using strings of words.

### **Functions of Language**

Different linguists have classified language functions differently. I would like to mention different functions put forward by different linguists and intellectuals and the meanings attached to them. Halliday, a British linguist, asserts that language has got four basic functions. He also distinguishes seven initial functions, which I would like to mention here with special reference to communicative language teaching. The functions of language will be further discussed in section 3.

#### **According to Halliday language has got four main functions:**

- a.** The Ideational Function: To organize the speaker's or writer's experience of the real or imaginary world, i.e. language refers to real or imaginary persons, things, actions, events, etc.
- b.** The Interpersonal Function: To indicate, establish or maintain social relationships between people. It includes forms of address, speech functions, modality, etc.
- c.** The Textual Function: To create written or spoken texts which cohere within themselves and which affect the particular situation in which they are used.
- d.** Developmental Function of Language: According to Halliday, (1973: 48-71) a young child in early stages of development is able to master a number of elementary functions of language. Each of these functions has a choice of meaning attached to it. He also distinguishes seven initial functions:
  - e.** Instrumental: This function is used for satisfying material needs.  
*I want a cup of coffee.*
  - f.** Regulatory: This function is used for controlling the behaviour of others. *Do as I tell you.*
  - g.** Interactional: It is used for getting along with other people.  
*Me and you.*
  - h.** Personal: It is used for identifying and expressing the self.  
*Here I come.*

- i. Heuristic: It is used for exploring the world around and inside one. *Tell me why.*
- j. Imaginative: This function is used for creating a world of one's own. *Let's pretend.*
- k. Imaginary: It is used for communicating new information. *I have got something to tell you.*

**Another British linguist, John Lyons (1977: 637) classifies language functions as follows:**

- a. **Descriptive function:** This function of language conveys factual information, e.g. it must be well below ten degrees outside.
- b. **Expressive function:** It is used to supply information about the speaker, his/her feelings, preferences, prejudices and past experience, e.g. I am not inviting the Scandinavian again. The speaker didn't like Scandinavians.
- c. **Social function:** This function serves to establish and mention social relations between people, e.g. Will that be alright, sir? This kind of sentence most probably is used by a waiter in a restaurant, signalling a particular social relationship.

**Karl Buhler (1934: 288) who was interested in language from the cultural point of view; stated his contentions as follows:**

- a. **Expressive function:** The expressive being language that is oriented towards the self, the speaker.
- b. **Conative function:** The conative being language that is oriented towards the addressee.
- c. **Representational function:** The representational being Language that is oriented towards the rest of reality-that is, anything other than the speaker or the addressee.

**Britton (1971: 205-209) discusses three different functions of language:**

- a. **Transactional function:** This function emphasises the participant's role.
- b. **Poetic function:** This function states that the writer's role is more important than that of the reader.
- c. **Expressive function:** It deals with writing ability.

**According to Morris (1956: 87) the functions of language are:**

- a. Information talking: Informative function orientation to content
- b. Exploratory talking: Imaginative function i. ritual, ii. poetic
- c. Interactive function

**Jacobson (1964: 181-182) distinguishes six communicative functions, each of which is associated with a dimension of the communication process:**

- a. Referential function: contextual information
- b. Aesthetic (poetic) function: auto reection
- c. Emotive function: self-expression
- d. Conative function: vocative or imperative addressing of receiver
- e. Phatic function: checking channel working
- f. Metalingual function: checking code working

According to Jacobson, out of six functions only one is dominant in a given case. In other words, the dominant function is the poetic function. Here the word text is taken in the broadest sense, i.e. any piece of language is considered a text. In the case of the poetic function the focus is on the message itself. In communication theory, the functions mentioned above could be illustrated as in Figure 1:

In language teaching, communicative objectives should be paramount. In other words, content of the material to be taught or learned should be given priority rather than the form of it. Form of language can help functions be realized. Functions of language categorized by different linguists should be internalized by learners. The functions mentioned in Figure 1 need to be explained very briefly.

**Emotive function:** It belongs to the addresser. This function reects the psychological mood and attitude of the addressee. In distance learning it is almost impossible to form a rapport between learner (addressee) and teacher

**Figure 1:** Language Functions and Communication (bold items) (addresser) which means there will not be mutual understanding between learner and teacher and this function cannot be realized.

**Conative function:** This function belongs or it refers to the addressee. It is used to influence the addressee. In distance learning addressee and the addresser do not share the same place even though they might share the same time. Since teaching and learning is a sort of communication, most communication is realized with the help of body language, facial expressions, and one- to- one interaction in the same place. In distance learning and teaching, it is disputable how this can be realized.

**Phatic function:** This function directly refers to context. It is used to keep the social wheels turning, i.e. strengthening social ties between addressee and addresser. Through this function learners are expected to learn daily, informal language. In distance learning and teaching neither party can have the chance to talk in an informal way. For instance they cannot gossip; they cannot talk about personal problems. Even if they do so, it will be very limited.

**Referential function:** This function explains the relationship between language and non-language. Non-language is the other means of communication, such as body language, gestures, facial expressions, posture, etc. Again, it is unlikely that these functions can be realized in distance learning and teaching.

**Metalanguage functions:** This function refers to the other component of communication theory, such as common code system (language). In this case the discrepancy between the addresser's and addressee's level of English is important-message, channel, etc. This function is used to define and describe some objects in order to use sophisticated language.

**Poetic function:** This function is used to express the creative and aesthetic aspects of language. It is also very difficult to realize this function since distance learning is a kind of programmed instruction. In such programs i.e. distance learning; there is no room for creativity and the aesthetic function of language. Foreign language instruction presents special



instructional challenges not only because of the lack of immediate two-way interaction that characterizes many distance education programs, but also because of loss of face mimics, eye contact, lost visual details in video conference due to signal compression, especially detailed lip movements. As this has hindered the acquisition of L2 (second language) phonetics, since its conception, it also has created trouble with testing material. Apart from delivery, the problem arises when the student is required to complete assignments and tests. Online courses (distance learning) have had difficulty controlling cheating due to the lack of teacher control.

In other words, there are three main problems which may arise from distance learning:

**Problem 1:** The loss of visual detail-lip movement sound quality:

This is particularly problematic in the teaching of pronunciation skills since students often rely on facial expressions as well as perceiving the second language phones, intonation, etc.

**Problem 2:** Assessment: testing material

**Problem 3:** Cheating may arise due to lack of teacher control, Indeed, language learning and teaching is a social service and learners and teachers alike are concerned with such necessary issues. Considering the role of language functions in face to face foreign language learning, this paper supports the following hypotheses:

- a. Distance learning is not a learner autonomy environment, whereas face to face learning is a learner autonomy environment, as far as the learner's attitude is concerned.
- b. In distance learning teachers are assisting tutors, whereas in face to face learning teachers are part of the learning process.
- c. The face-to-face learning system is a problem-solving learning environment. It is difficult, however, to say the same thing for distance learning.
- d. The face to face learning system is interactive in many dimensions, such as teacher-student, student-teacher, student-student, whereas, distance learning is limited, to the interactive, but with complete teacher-student dimension.

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