

Teaching African Languages through Distance Education

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Abstract

Distance education has always posed many problems for instructors, perhaps, the most obvious being how best to deliver lessons and maintain effective communication given the physical distance between student and instructor. There are even more challenges in L2 teaching where the major goal is to get learners to speak in the target language rather than simply acquiring knowledge and being able to demonstrate it through written assignments as is the case with many other subjects. However, with advances in technology, many of the problems can now be solved. This paper discusses distance education, looking at some of the challenges and how they can be resolved in the teaching of African languages. It is argued that a synchronous distance education class is ideal for teaching and learning a language, and when instruction is modeled on sound pedagogical principles can just be as effective as a conventional class.

Keywords: distance education, synchronous, technology, learning, teaching, target language

Introduction

Distance education has always posed many problems for instructors, perhaps, the most obvious being how best to deliver lessons and maintain effective communication given the physical distance between student and instructor. There are even more challenges in foreign or second language teaching where the major goal is to get learners to speak and communicate in the target language rather than simply acquiring knowledge and being able to demonstrate it through written assignments and examinations as is the case with many other subjects. However, with advances in technology and careful planning, many of the problems can now be easily overcome. This paper looks at some of the challenges and how they can be resolved in teaching distance education African language classes. Although it is inspired by the success of a pilot pre-COVID-19 US distance education Beginning Zulu class, this paper is not presented as a report but looks at general issues as they may affect any other African language class using the same or a similar model.

Note that issues of oral proficiency particularly at different levels (elementary, intermediate, advanced, and superior) are not directly addressed in this paper as it is assumed they are not significantly different from those affecting a regular face-to-face class in the model argued for here. A separate detailed study would have to be carried out to establish if there are any considerable differences in oral proficiency outcomes between the two models.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section focuses on terminology, addressing the question of what distance education is. Then follows a section on pedagogical issues, and another discusses other related pedagogical and practical issues. The last section is the conclusion.

What is Distance Education?

The Origins

Distance education is not new. It has been around for more than a century in one form or another. As Daniel (2000:1) points out, the communication system of the Roman Empire set the ball rolling by introducing the precursor of modern distance education although it might not have been called ‘distance education’ at the time. During that period the printing press was invented and postal services were established thereby enabling the printing and distribution of many copies of learning materials to many people. Later, towards the end of the 19th-century correspondence education became popular. The 20th century then saw the introduction of radio, telephone, cinema, television, programmed learning, computers, and the internet as important tools for distributing learning materials in distance education. Perhaps the use of many different tools contributed to the confusion in the use of the term ‘distance education’ and other related terms that now abound. An attempt to define the terms is made in the next subsection.

Definitions: Distance Education, Distance Learning, Distributed Learning, and Online Learning

‘Distance education’ is often confused with ‘distance learning’, ‘distributed learning’, and ‘online learning’. The four terms refer to the “application of information technology (and infrastructure) to educational and student-related activities linking teachers and students in different places. All communications are mediated by some type of electronic means in real

or delayed time” (Schlosser & Simonson 2010: 129)¹. Let us consider each of the terms in turn below.

Distance Education. Put simply, distance education is an all-embracing or “generic, all-inclusive term used to refer to the physical separation of teachers and learners” (Schlosser & Simonson 2010: 129). It is a form of education in which the learner (or some learners) and instructor are separate during all or a significant proportion of instruction. (See also Johnson 2003:1 and Kidd & Song 2007:289). Technology often plays an important role in bridging the instructional gap in distance education.

Distance Learning. In recent years this term has become almost synonymous with distance education, especially in the United States where it is commonly used (Schlosser & Simonson 2010: 130). As Schlosser & Simonson observe, in distance learning “students take on greater responsibility for their learning”. Emphasis is on learner autonomy whereas ‘distance education’ is an all-embracing term that includes even distance learning as already pointed out above. The term *distance learning*, therefore, might not be suitable to use for a video conferencing class taught more like a regular class.

Distributed Learning. This refers to a model of distance education or a learning situation where learners, instructors, and materials are all in different locations. (See, for example, Saltzberg & Polyson, 1995:10). Obviously, technology has to play a very important role in the success of this instructional model as students need to access materials and communicate with the instructor.

Online Learning. When one talks about taking or teaching a distance education class it is common nowadays for people to immediately assume that reference is being made to an online class and yet ‘online learning’ is just one form of distance education. In online learning “instruction and interaction are primarily based on the technologies available from the internet and the World Wide Web” (Kidd & Song 2007: 290). Instructor-Student and Student-Student interaction is through Internet-based communication. Materials are normally posted on a class website and a course management system is often used. In other words, the use of the computer or other electronic devices is central to this mode of teaching and learning.

Main Models of Distance Education

There are three broad categories of distance education: asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid. Although asynchronous distance education has a long history and was probably the most widely used before the COVID-19 pandemic, with advances in technology, the other two models are increasingly becoming popular.

Asynchronous. This model is the traditional one whereby instruction is delivered at one time and students can participate at another time. Correspondence and online learning are probably some of the most well-known versions of asynchronous distance education. Written and audiovisual learning materials are prepared by the instructor for distribution to students who later access them when they are delivered or posted on the internet. Accessing the materials is usually at a time convenient for the students.

Synchronous. The synchronous model involves at least a two-way communication with no time delay. It happens in real-time so that when instruction is delivered response is immediate. It is normally done through video conferencing and instruction is almost as it would be in a regular or traditional classroom setting. (See, for example, Birnbaum 2001: 85).

Synchronous distance education through video conferencing appears to be the model ideal for language classes. While the instructor can be in one location and students in another, for African languages in the US it seems best to have student participants at both the telecast site and the remote location at the same time especially as it is cost-effective and allows for a reasonably sized class. As Johnson (2003: 54) notes, “a live video link displays” the images of participants “on monitors in each location’s classroom” thereby displaying their presence while “telecommunication allows for their verbal interaction”. Advances in technology have even made it possible for computers to handle both video and sound simultaneously. The rationale for arguing for this model will even be clearer in the next section.

Hybrid. The hybrid model is a combination of both the synchronous and asynchronous models. From the curriculum, what is taught through the synchronous model and what is assigned to students via the asynchronous model may vary depending on the institutional, learner, or instructor's needs and preferences. There may be more from one model than the other.

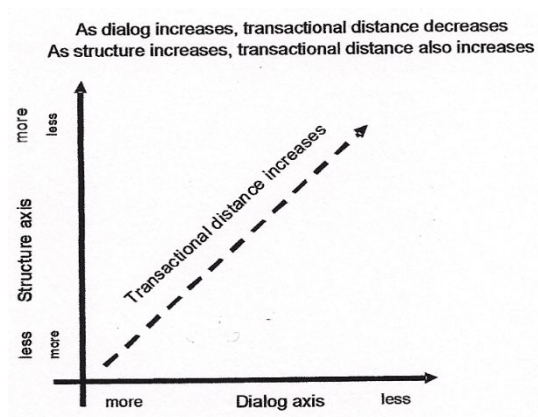
Pedagogical Issues

Having mentioned above that the synchronous model is the one ideal for the teaching of African languages or languages in general, it is necessary to show why it should be preferred to the other two models. Traditional asynchronous distance education classes tend to place a lot of emphasis on learner independence. For a language class, this can still work if the goal is just to focus on reading, writing, and listening as the students can do these tasks by themselves if they have access to the required written and audiovisual materials. However, if speaking, oral proficiency, or language proficiency, in general, is the goal then this cannot easily be achieved in the traditional asynchronous setup since students need more interaction with the instructor and with each other. Student-content interaction on its own is not enough. The synchronous video conferencing model that mimics the traditional regular class is best suited for the kind of student-student and teacher-student interaction also necessary (in addition to student-content interaction) in a language class whose goal is proficiency like most African language classes. While distance study in general leaves many students “feeling isolated, missing face-to-face contact with staff, and lacking confidence in managing the technology associated with the study” (Owens, Hardcastle, and Richardson 2009:70), Anderson (2008:112) observes that videoconferencing “...overcomes many of the objections that people have to education that occurs anywhere beyond the face-to-face classroom” such as “the lack of interaction associated with correspondence study”.

It is also important to note that dialogue is generally more important in language learning compared to many other subjects. The importance of dialogue in language learning can, perhaps, be viewed in terms of Moore’s (2007) transactional distance theory. The theory advances a system that focuses on the interaction between three key variables: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. According to Shearer (2007: 220), dialogue can be viewed as “communications between student and instructor leading to the construction of knowledge or advances a student’s understanding of materials being studied”. Perhaps, what needs to be added to this is that student-student interaction is also part of dialogue since, in many respects, it advances the same goal as teacher-student interaction. For instance, when teaching about bargaining at the market, a feature of many African societies, giving students instructions and letting them act it out might be better than just explaining or letting them read about what happens at the market. Of course, they can still ask the teacher questions after an explanation or reading but the interaction between themselves as they act out the scene seems more

effective. Shearer further explains that structure refers to “the amount of freedom a program gives the student in determining pace, sequence, learning objectives and outcomes, and assessment strategies” while learner autonomy is “the degree of interplay the student needs with the learning organization or learning environment”. Say students are having a hard time understanding noun classes in a Bantu language like Zulu or Swahili, feedback is immediate in a regular face-to-face class and the teacher can change the way s/he teaches to help learners. This flexibility (or less structure) is one of the advantages of video conferencing over asynchronous distance education. Transactional distance is a function of dialogue and structure. As seen in Figure 1 below, as dialogue increases, transactional distance decreases, and as structure increases, transactional distance also increases.

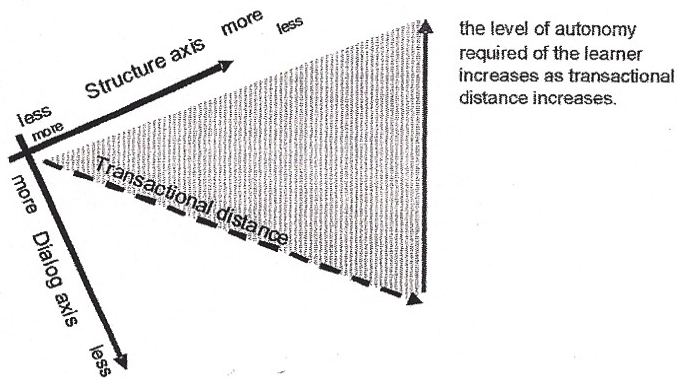
Figure 1. Relationship of dialogue, structure, and transactional distance (Moore 2007:94)



For a language class, the ideal situation is to have more dialogue and less structure to keep the transactional distance minimal. In other words, there must be more student-teacher interaction, student-student interaction and more flexibility in the way material is covered to allow for a better grasp of concepts and language in general.

The other key variable, learner autonomy is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Learner Autonomy (Moore 2007:96)



As can be seen, as transactional distance and structure increase the level of autonomy required of the learner increases as well. In our case emphasis must not be on learner autonomy but the goal should be to minimize the transactional distance thereby making conditions conducive to language learning and indeed proficiency.

Other Pedagogical and Practical Issues

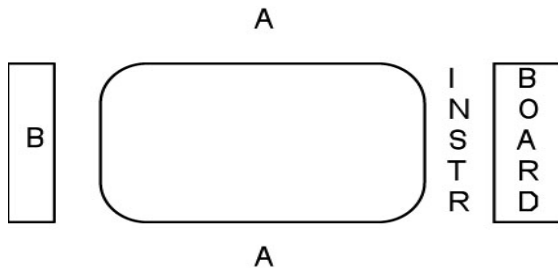
Sitting Arrangement and General Organization of the Classroom

The sitting arrangement can be very important in how a lesson is delivered. While some of the most common sitting arrangements in a regular/traditional class are sitting in groups, sitting in a circle, sitting in a semi-/half-moon circle, and sitting in rows, in a video conferencing class there is the camera to consider. The instructor must try by all means to stay in view of all students and also ensure that all students are in focus most of the time. Of course, it is useful to zoom in and out as different participants take turns to speak but focusing on a few individuals for too long without seeing what the rest of the class is doing could be just as disastrous as when a teacher spends too much time with just one group in a regular class without seeing what the groups behind him/her are doing. When out of view for too long, some students may feel left out and lose interest and end up doing other things not related to the lesson without the teacher's knowledge. In a language class, it is also essential for students to see the instructor's gestures and how s/he pronounces sounds. In Shona, for example, people clap their hands when greeting and men and women do it differently. For students to get this right it may be necessary to see how the teacher does it. Some sounds of a language being taught may also be pronounced with the mouth wide

open or with lip rounding. When the instructor is out of focus all this is lost. Although modern cameras can be manipulated to focus on any part of the room, to avoid these problems a good sitting arrangement needs to be decided upon before teaching commences.

Ignoring the situation where COVID-19 forced many students to learn from home, for now, a good sitting arrangement will in most cases depend on the position of the camera or its flexibility in focusing, the number of participants, the nature of the room and the flexibility in moving furniture and other materials in it. In general, a rectangle or round rectangle works well for a video conferencing class. This sitting arrangement is illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Sitting Arrangement



The sitting arrangement illustrated by Figure 3 would be ideal if say University A (the telecast site) has a large number of students compared to University B (the remote location). University A students sit on either side of the long table while University B students and the instructor sit on opposite short sides. University B students would be present only through a large monitor but for the most part, one would even forget that they are not physically present in the classroom if the lesson is carefully planned and goes on well. The best position for the camera in this case would be above the monitor so that the University A students, instructor, and board are all in view. The instructor's default place should be next to the board preferably a movable one to allow for flexibility in case adjustments need to be made. Note that the board is at the best viewing position for University B whose participants may have problems viewing small handwriting at an angle. This sitting arrangement allows dialogue to occur as in the traditional face-to-face classroom and allows for flexibility in determining pace, sequence, learning objectives and outcomes, and assessment strategies as the instructor can easily keep track of student needs including those to do with speaking. In other words, it makes it possible to have less structure and more dialogue

thereby reducing considerably the problems of transactional distance often associated with distance education study.

The hi-tech room may, of course, have other equipment such as computers, printers, scanners, and remote controls. The instructor may not have control over where these are placed in the room. What is important is that when there is no zooming in all participants should be able to see each other and feel that they belong to the same class even though they may be in different locations. With African language classes, this should generally not be a problem as they are usually small.

A projector may be mounted on the ceiling facing the screen that drops in front of the board or on one side of the room behind some University A students who can just turn around for viewing. With a good video conferencing system University B participants should be able to view clearly what is projected on the screen. In the past what used to be even very helpful, especially when using a Polycom or similar system, was that from a small window on the monitor the instructor was able to see exactly what the remote site was viewing. Participants from both institutions were able to view movies and other images from DVDs, videocassettes, and the computer from the screen at the same time. All this reduced the transactional distance significantly as students in University B were made to feel, to a greater extent, as part of a regular class.

From 2020 COVID-19 forced students to learn from home and instructors to also teach from their residences. This meant that the ideal sitting arrangement could no longer be attained as each student was connecting to the class through his/her own computer or phone which has a camera. Although all students and the instructor could potentially view each other from the same screen some institutions did not mandate students to show their faces on the screen especially due to the glaring social inequalities exposed by different camera backgrounds. Smaller screens could also not show everyone's face and there were times when the instructor needed a larger part of the screen for illustrations or showing a video. While the situation seems to be going back to normal it remains to be seen whether or not most instruction will revert to face-to-face. The COVID-19 pandemic has also taught people that they don't need to leave their homes for synchronous online learning and this renders the sitting arrangement discussed above less important. The teacher now has to find other ways of keeping all students engaged including those whose faces s/he cannot see.

Creating activities that force all students to participate seems to be the solution. For example, when using group work the instructor can choose at random and at the end the member who reports for his/her group. When students know that the teacher will do this, besides spending some time in each breakout room, it forces all of them to participate and be ready to give their reports. This should be easy to do as the problem of assigning group work online has been solved by breakout rooms that programs such as ZOOM now offer.

Course Management System

A course management system (sometimes referred to as a learning management system or virtual learning environment) is essential for a distance education class as it makes communication between student and instructor more efficient (in a way, promoting dialogue) than when there is none and helps in the general organization of the class. Many course management systems work well such as those powered by Sakai, Desire to Learn (D2L), Blackboard, WebCT (now part of Blackboard), and Moodle (a free open-source web application). In the course management system, the instructor can place the syllabus and course materials such as assignments, exercises, tests/quizzes, reading materials, links to websites, and sound files. Even announcements can be posted on the system when not made in class or if there is a need for students to refer to them later. Besides getting or viewing their materials on the system, students also can send their work to the instructor via the same medium. E-mail may also be available for communication between students and instructors and can be generated within the course management system in many cases. All this favors dialogue and provides some flexibility for the course thereby reducing structure.

Homework, Class Exercises, Quizzes/Tests

It is good practice for the instructor to post homework on the course website in the management system and for students to submit their completed work in their drop boxes or any appropriate area in the system. Homework can, for example, be posted in the form of a document or reference to specific exercises in the class textbook. It can also be linked to sound files that students have to listen to and place responses in their drop boxes or the appropriate place within the system. In the past, since the instructor could not pass out papers to students at the remote site during class, exercises, quizzes, and tests for the lesson of the day would be posted on the class website at the beginning of class or at the point when they are

required during the lesson so that all student view them at the same time. When posted, students at both the telecast site and remote location(s) would be able to instantly see them by logging into their accounts, no one would be disadvantaged. There are of course other assignments that could be posted earlier when it was necessary that students view them before class. This is still true even with current synchronous classes where all students remain at their home institutions or residences during class.

From our example above students at University B could send all their completed work electronically by placing it in their drop boxes. Students at University A could do the same although the option of writing on pieces of paper that they hand to the instructor could also be available. Drop boxes ensure that no assignment is lost and are secure in that a student has access only to his/her box and only the instructor can view boxes for all students in the class. The date and time when materials are placed on the drop box can also be displayed in some systems so that no student can cheat and, for example, turn in a test or assignment late. This works even with current students who now rely mainly on computers and phones.

Grading essay-type work or assignments where divergent answers are expected is generally faster for many instructors when using the traditional way (with pen check marks and comments) than doing it on the computer. For this reason, assignments for a video conferencing class would often be printed out and corrected the traditional way. While students at the telecast site could be handed their corrected work, for the remote site corrected assignments could be faxed provided there was an assistant (or any other designated person) to receive them and pass them on to students. Otherwise, the instructor could end up dealing with privacy issues if any student could pick them up from the fax machine. If there was no assistant, assignments for the remote site could be corrected on the computer and then placed in the drop boxes. A low-cost program such as PDF Pen when used with a handwriting font could still give the students the feeling that comments on their assignments have been handwritten just like those for students at the telecast site. Giving students this feeling is in itself important as it gives a sense of having only a very small or no transactional distance. Assignments can still be graded this way even today when most students would be at home for a synchronous online class.

After each set of assignments is graded (including exams), grades must be entered in the grade book part of the course management system where they may be automatically computed and weighted accordingly

depending on the versatility of the system. This makes the instructor's job easier at the end of the term as there are no calculations to be made. Also, during the term, the instructor can easily monitor student progress and help those who are having problems.

Group Work and Chat Room

Using group work in a video conferencing class was generally very challenging as student participants were in different locations. While it was important to keep everyone occupied and to provide a sense of oneness by ensuring that each group had students from either campus there was the problem that some were only present through the monitor and could therefore not move to any assigned group. Also, using the monitor for group work was not ideal as only one group could use it at a time and members of that group could not keep their discussion to only their group like other groups. To overcome these obstacles, group work was assigned as homework and then each group would present its work when the class meets the next time. For groups to work outside class students could use e-mail or telephone but the chat room was the best option. Students could agree on a time to go to the chat room and exchange their ideas there. As already pointed out, group work is no longer for the chatroom. The creation of breakout rooms in ZOOM and other programs has made it possible for students to interact in small groups.

The Chat Room generally fills the social interaction gap created by a distance education class. In the traditional face-to-face setup, besides meeting during lessons, students have the opportunity for social interaction or chatting especially just before the lesson begins and at the end of class. In a distance education class, this is generally minimal, particularly between students from different campuses and when students remain at home for lessons. The Chat Room tries to bring back this informal aspect of interaction. This, of course, also promotes dialogue and provides more freedom in the ways students interact.

Exams/Presentations

While it is important to give students in different locations the same examinations that are fair to all, it is also important to also consider how this will be done as the instructor can only be in one location at a time. If the instructor has an assistant at a remote location, a normally written class examination may work well as the process can be monitored on either site. However, if the instructor has no one to monitor the examination at the

remote location, then a normal written class exam may not be fair to those at the telecast site who are continuously monitored by the instructor while those at the remote location have room to cheat. A take-home or an open-book exam may be best as no student will be disadvantaged. A class presentation or a combination of these possibilities may also be appropriate. However, the current situation whereby all students in the synchronous class may be at home allows the instructor to give the exam fairly without disadvantaging one group.

Other Related Issues

Expenses

In the past, many institutions could not afford video conferencing due to the astronomical cost of cameras, monitors, and other related hi-tech equipment. This situation has vastly changed in recent years as many universities can now afford hi-tech rooms fully equipped with cameras, monitors, lenses, DVD players, computers, etc. Most of the equipment is of a far much higher quality compared to similar products that could be purchased in the past and can be bought at a fraction of what it used to cost. Expense is, therefore, no longer an excuse for not doing video conferencing or teaching a synchronous online class as universities can now afford it and most of them already have the hi-tech rooms with the required equipment. Also, most students and instructors have their own computers and phones that they can use for such classes.

Student Registration

Student registration is generally not an issue for the instructor. However, it is worth pointing out that student registration issues need to be dealt with by the administration well before classes begin as students (especially those at the ‘remote’ site(s)) need to be sure that they will get full credit for their work. Failure to assure students that they will get credit at the end of the term can significantly affect enrollment in the class.

Scheduling and Rooms

While in the past scheduling needed to be done early as video conferencing typically involved two or more campuses although it was also possible to do it within the same campus (for example, when only one instructor was teaching two or more classes that were at the same level) this seems to be now an issue when only two or more institutions are involved. Campuses may have different time schedules and be in different time zones.

Also, one campus may be on a quarter system while the other is on a semester system. Good meeting times that take all these differences into account must be chosen early while there is still scheduling flexibility on each campus. Now that everyone uses his/her own computer or phone video conferencing or synchronous online learning no longer requires specialized hi-tech rooms in both the telecast and remote site(s).

Employment Issues

Potential Job Losses

There are potential job losses if a distance education program is not carefully planned. If the traditional or regular class setup is working well, there is no need to change it by introducing video conferencing as some instructors may unjustifiably lose their jobs. Video conferencing fills a gap whereby the instructor cannot be in two or more locations at the same time. However, synchronous online classes can take some of the advantages of technology discussed above if the instructor's job is not threatened.

Job Creation

Contrary to what can be easily assumed, that the use of video conferencing in teaching could lead to job losses, it is in fact likely to create more professional and stable jobs for African language teachers and other teachers of less commonly taught languages. Although there have been signs of change in the administration of programs in African languages in recent years, many institutions still hire African language instructors to teach part-time. This has seen many of them failing to attract qualified instructors, especially from far away as the instructor cannot sustain their life on the meager demeaning pay offered with no other benefits. As a result, many institutions have had to resort to hiring any locals or graduate students who speak the languages being offered as tutors even if their training or studies have nothing to do with language or education/ teaching. Even in cases where a qualified instructor is found locally, professionalism is usually compromised since the instructor has to rush to another part-time job (that may have nothing to do with teaching) before or after teaching his/her African language class. (See also Bokamba 2002 for other related issues). Video conferencing should be a solution as two or three institutions can share expenses and make it possible to hire a qualified full-time instructor with all the benefits befitting of the position.

There are also times when an institution has to decide between which of the two or three African languages (etc.) to offer due to limited resources. Consider, for example, a situation whereby University A wants to offer Zulu and Yoruba but can only afford to hire only one full-time instructor and University B is in the same dilemma. Rather than hiring four dissatisfied part-timers, video conferencing could make it possible to hire two professional full-time instructors. University A could hire a Zulu instructor while University B hires a Yoruba instructor. Video conferencing would then make it possible to offer both languages in the two institutions.

Many institutions wish to offer African languages but lack adequate resources. If these institutions pull their resources together or partner with institutions already offering these languages, they could be able to offer African language classes and hire qualified full-time instructors who teach via video conferencing.

Getting the Required Class Size

Another problem that often comes up in the teaching of African and other less commonly taught languages is failure to meet institutional requirements on class size. For instance, if University A has three students who want to take Zulu and University B has two, video conferencing can be a solution if the minimum class size in each of the institutions is four or even five students. In other words, instead of having two small classes, one larger more acceptable class can be created through the use of video conferencing.

Word of Caution

Finally, in reference to video conferencing Carter and Heale (2010: 109-110) warn that ‘all that glitters is not gold’ and highlight the need for advanced planning and getting technical, pedagogical, and human support. As with any technology, there will always be problems here and there such as a dropped connection once in a while, but this should not be the order of the day if the program is carefully planned and the right equipment is used.

Conclusion

The discussion above clearly demonstrates that a synchronous distance education class is ideal for teaching and learning African languages (or any other Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL)) and, when instruction is modeled on sound pedagogical principles with learner-centered activities, can just be as effective as a conventional class. It has also been shown that, with the current difficulties in hiring and retaining qualified African language

teachers in the US, synchronous distance education can be the way forward. It has the potential of bringing professionalism into the field especially by attracting qualified teachers who are offered the benefits they deserve.

Notes

The explanation in Schlosser & Simonson (2010:129) refers only to 'distance education', 'distance learning', and 'distributed learning' but it seems appropriate to include 'online learning' as well.

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