Enhancing Distance Course Design: Insights from Student and Teacher Reflections

Wang, Yi-Chien

Assistant Professor, Department of Applied English,
Chihlee University of Technology

Kao, Shu-Hua

Associate Professor, Department of Applied English,
Chihlee University of Technology

Abstract

Distance learning plays an increasingly crucial role in today's education. Since the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has swept the globe, and unprecedented opportunities and challenges for distance learning have been presented. This paper aims to explore insights into effective future distance course design by reflecting on students' and teachers' experiences in distance learning. Two distance courses related to Business English offered for students majoring in Applied English in a university in Northern Taiwan were selected for reflection. It is found that most students appreciated the flexibility of distance learning and believed that it helped enhance learner autonomy. However, lack of teacher support and self-discipline were what students found challenging in taking distance courses. The teachers also encountered some challenges in terms of limited interaction with students, low student engagement, and restrictions in the use of course platform. Based on these reflections, some pedagogical implications are provided to enhance future distance course design providing a more enriching learning and teaching experience.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Reflections, Course Design

Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid advancement of technology, distance learning (DL) has played an increasingly vital role in the field of education. Since the early 2000s, with the widespread availability of the Internet and technological progress, DL in Taiwan has gained prominence (Liang, 2001). Universities and high schools started offering online courses, enabling students to learn without time and location constraints. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, most schools and educational institutions shifted to DL to ensure continuous and safe learning for students (Hu, 2022). However, this transition has brought various challenges for both students and teachers in the online learning environment (Lin et al., 2022). Students need to develop learner autonomy (Chu, 2006) while teachers face barriers in interacting effectively with their students (Liang, 2001). These challenges necessitate a reevaluation of the ways of designing future DL courses.

Based on the rationale, this paper aims to provide valuable suggestions for future distance course design by conducting an in-depth analysis of both students' and teachers' experiences in two distance courses related to Business English. By reflecting on the learning challenges faced by students and the teaching dilemmas encountered by instructors, it is hoped to explore adaptive, interactive, and inspiring course design solutions.

Literature Review

Distance Learning Definition

Distance learning (DL), also called distance education, e-learning, and online learning, as an emerging educational format, has been widely discussed and defined. Generally speaking, DL refers to instruction in which teachers and students are physically separated and communication occurs through various technological tools (SUNY Morrisville, n.d.). Thus, DL heavily relies on technology. Through both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools like the Internet, video conferencing, real-time chat, emails, and online learning management systems, teachers and students can engage in interactions and learning (Chu, 2006). In fact, DL goes beyond technological applications. It also involves curriculum design and teaching methods. In DL, course design should incorporate elements of interactivity and student engagement to encourage active participation (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). DL encompasses various teaching methods, such as recorded course videos, online discussions, and assignment submissions, which

provide students with varied learning experiences (The Ohio State University, n.d.). The choice of teaching methods should consider students' learner autonomy, encouraging them to actively participate in discussions and collaborations in the online environment (Lin, 2022).

DL is evolving in various forms, and one of them is blended learning. Blended learning combines traditional classroom teaching with online learning (Gülbahar & Madran, 2009). This allows students to engage in self-paced online learning while still retaining opportunities for face-to-face interactions with peers and teachers in the classroom setting (Tayebinik & Puteh, 2013). Hence, blended learning reserves the merits of DL and traditional physical classroom learning. In the current paper, one of the two selected observed distance courses, Business English Writing, can be categorized as blended learning in that it combines synchronous and asynchronous online learning with physical classroom learning. As for the other course, Workplace English, the teaching was carried out either in synchronous or asynchronous online sessions. Only the paper-and-pencil midterm exam and final group presentations were in the form of physical classes, as requested by the school.

Advantages and Challenges of Distance Learning

DL, as a modern educational approach, comes with both advantages and challenges. One of the key advantages of DL is flexibility (Warschauer, 1995). Students have the freedom to choose wherever and whenever they want to learn at their own pace in privacy (Natarajan, 2005). In other words, they can enjoy personalized learning experiences which accommodate their individual styles. Additionally, distance courses are more affordable than traditional courses (Brown, 2017). Students save both time and money on commuting while schools incur fewer costs related to campus facilities and services. Furthermore, DL transcends geographical boundaries, allowing students and teachers from diverse locations worldwide to engage in education, and fostering international educational exchanges (D'Agostino, 2022).

However, DL is not without its challenges. One significant drawback is the reduction in social interactions (Brown, 2017). Unlike traditional physical classrooms, face-to-face communication between students and teachers is limited in online learning environments, impacting the development of teacher-student relationships and diminishing students' learning motivation. Another challenge for students in DL

is lack of immediate response (Hutt, 2017). When students are learning online, it may be difficult for them to get immediate answers to their questions and feedback from the teacher, which may affect the effectiveness and progress of their learning. Moreover, DL demands students to possess strong self-discipline as they need to manage their learning schedules independently, posing a challenge for those lacking self-motivation (Bijeesh, 2017). Technical limitations also pose an issue, as both students and teachers must adapt to and master various digital tools, which can be challenging for individuals with limited technological proficiency (Brown, 2017). Finally, DL may result in educational inequality (Korkmaz et al., 2022). The need for appropriate technological facilities and Internet access may exacerbate educational inequality by preventing less well-off students from participating in DL.

In sum, these advantages and challenges provide opportunities for reflection. In future distance course designs, finding a balance is essential – harnessing the benefits of DL while overcoming its associated challenges. This balance ensures that students receive a high-quality, interactive educational experience.

Distance Learning and Teaching Experiences

In order to explore a practical DL course design, two courses offered by the Department of Applied English at a university in northern Taiwan were selected for observation and reflection. The themes of these two courses were both related to business English, titled "Workplace English" and "Business English Writing." Both students' and teachers' reflections were collected at the end of the semester as data, which were analyzed qualitatively. Their reflections were read and categorized. It is hoped that more suitable and practical instructional course design suggestions for future distance courses can be provided by reflecting on the students' feedback and the teachers' teaching experiences in these two courses.

Both courses were implemented following the DL implementation guidelines of the school announced for the academic year. The guidelines defined DL as teaching conducted interactively between instructors and students through communication networks, computer networks, video channels, and other transmission media. According to the guidelines, more than half of the teaching hours for each 18-week course must be conducted through DL methods. However, mid-term and final exams were primarily held as paper-and-pencil tests in face-to-face classrooms. Moreover, teachers were required to arrange at least six synchronous online teaching sessions and give related online assignments, quizzes, and topic discussions in distance courses. The both selected courses complied with the regulations. The teaching methods consisted of synchronous and asynchronous online sessions, assignments, quizzes, and topic discussions designed for student participation.

Course 1: Workplace English

Course Introduction

The first selected distance course under observation and reflection is Workplace English. This course was aimed to familiarize students with the English used in the process of job application, such as want ads, cover letters, and resumes, etc., and business presentations. Over the span of 18 weeks in the semester, the course consisted of six synchronous online sessions, 10 asynchronous online sessions, and mid-term and final exams conducted on-site in the classroom. The course was theme-based. For each theme, the basic knowledge, related issues, and authentic examples were presented and discussed. Various activities, such as online quizzes, assignments, and discussion forums, were also provided to complement the learning. The mid-term exam focused on the content taught in the course, while the final exam involved group presentations practicing business presentations. This was a required evening school degree program course for sophomores majoring in Applied English. Specifically, in this selected course, there were 55 students in total, including one freshman, 42 sophomores and nine senior students from the Department of Applied English, and three senior students from the other departments. The students in the course were assessed in the following five criteria: participation (10%), including both asynchronous learning video clip watching and synchronous online session attendance, responses to the course discussion forum (20%), online quizzes (10%), assignments (20%), mid-term exam (20%), and final exam (20%).

Students' Reflections on the Course

At the end of the course, the students were encouraged to write their feedback by reflecting on their participation in this course. By examining their written feedback, both positive and negative comments were identified. Their reflections can be categorized and summarized as follows:

A. Flexibility

In this distance course, the students were only required to attend synchronous sessions on certain dates while in the asynchronous sessions they could flexibly manage their learning schedules. Thus, the students expressed that they

could self-decide when and where to complete the learning tasks such as watching course videos, assignments, and quizzes within the given deadlines. DL courses offer more freedom and flexibility compared to face-to-face physical classes.

S41: Online courses offer more *flexibility* in time; I can complete the assignments within the deadline.

S7: Studying through distance learning allows me to *manage my learning schedule better*.

B. Interaction

Even though interaction in distance courses is limited (Brown, 2017), the students in this course reflected that there were still opportunities for teacher-student interactions during synchronous online sessions. Also, they received teachers' feedback on their assignments and their posts on the forum.

S5: Distance learning involves interaction. In this course, the teacher gave clear assignment instructions. She even gave feedback to each student. She is really diligent and involved in the course.

S22: I am grateful to the teacher for her wholehearted efforts. I learned a lot from her responses in the discussion forum, comments on assignments and reports, well-prepared lessons and assignments, and her careful explanations during synchronous sessions.

C. Enhanced awareness of learner autonomy

One of the benefits of asynchronous elements of DL is that it allows learners to choose when and where they study (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Some students in this course shared the similar opinion. They reflected that DL enabled them to learn how to manage their time and allowed them to have more chances to practice what they were learning.

S31: Distance learning allows me to manage and plan my study schedule on my own.

S5: The assignment of composing a cover letter was really difficult. I've revised it many times, but it's been a great learning experience and I've really benefited from it.

D. Lack of self-discipline

Although the students appreciated the opportunity of autonomous learning given by the distance course, some of them honestly confessed that they were lack of self-discipline.

S10: The advantage of distance learning is the flexibility of time, but because of this flexibility, it requires *more self-discipline* to avoid missing assignments. I am not disciplined enough yet.

S11: Distance learning allows for flexibility in terms of time, but it requires self-discipline to manage time for assignments.

S5: I sometimes forget to submit assignments or take online exams. I really need to remind myself more.

E. Lost in learning

Despite the positive feedback, the students showed some negative responses to the distance course. One student mentioned that he didn't know how to complete the assignment even after he finished watching the asynchronous course videos. In asynchronous DL, students learn through reading materials or watching course videos. If they encounter confusion and do not actively seek clarification, it might adversely affect their learning.

S36: I had tried to learn from the videos, but sometimes I still couldn't understand how to do the assignments.

F. Desire to have face-to-face physical courses

One of the students hoped that the course could be offered as a face-to-face physical one.

S52: This is a very practical course, but it's challenging to learn online. I hope the school can turn it into a face-to-face physical course.

G. Video Quality

The last negative feedback to this distance learning course is that a student pointed out that the volume of the asynchronous course videos was too low and suggested that this could be improved in the future.

S33: When the teacher makes the course videos in the future, I hope she can speak louder. Now it's difficult for me to clearly hear the audio even with my headphones on.

Teacher's Reflections on the Course

Similar to the students' reflection on their own experiences in this distance course, the teacher of this course also reflected on her teaching. Some challenges are identified by the teacher during the actual teaching process of this course. First, in this distance course, teachers only had real-time interaction with students during synchronous online sessions, midterm and final exams conducted on-site. During other times, communication relied on other channels like

email and class group chats on messaging apps for example Line. However, these modes of communication lack immediate responses. This inconvenience might reduce students' willingness to actively ask teacher questions. Meanwhile, the teacher could not fully understand individual students' needs due to lack of interaction. To maintain interaction with students, the teacher of this course made great efforts, including giving notifications on Line groups, making course announcements, and responding to discussion forum posts or assignments on the e-learning platform. Unfortunately, on the e-learning platform mandated by the school, the function of comments for assignments was limited in length, which restricted the teacher's comments on students' work. Finally, the teacher observed that the students were not active enough in submitting assignments early in the semester. They often delayed submissions until the end of the semester.

Course 2: Business English Writing

Course Introduction

The course 'Business English Writing' aims to help the learners to enhance their essential writing skills as well as applying these skills to writing different types of business letters. To be specific, the course was designed to help students enhance their business English writing ability by introducing various types of business letters as well as providing practice for them to increase their grammar and business vocabulary ability. Further, the course offered opportunities for the students to practice writing using task-based activities. The students of the course were in their senior year of their evening school degree program. There were 56 English majors enrolled on this course. The course included nine online learning sessions and nine face-to-face teaching sessions. The students' performance was assessed based on five main categories: course participation (10%), quiz outcome (15%), homework results (10%), involvement of online discussion (10%) and the scores of paper-and-pen mid-term (25%) and end-of-term exam (30%).

Students' Reflections on the Course

Overall, the majority of the students held rather positive viewpoints towards this way of learning. In particular, the students' positive feedback regarding DL could be classified into the following four themes.

A. Flexibility and Convenience:
The majority of the students wrote about the convenient feature of the course, which echoed Warschauer's (1995) notion that DL has the advantage of flexibility and convenience. Here are five examples of their reflection:

S2: Our learning will *not be limited by time or location*.

S8: For people who have to work like me, online course *allows me to study without having to give up my work*.

S22: It's good that I *can take care of both work and study*.

S23: I think distance learning is a great way of teaching and learning… we can *learn during our free time*.

S40: The course offers a *very convenient way of learning*. It really is suitable for me.

B. Personalized learning:
Another stream of feedback is related to how the learners could personalize their own learning through DL. Here are three extracts from the students' feedback:

S19: Online learning allows me to take notes slowly. Very beneficial for my learning.

S36: I can adjust my learning pace based on my liking.

S38: It's suitable for arranging my own time for studying.

By learning at their own paces and arranging their time for learning, these students have actually carried out personalized learning through this blended course.

C. Repeatedly learning:
Another theme derived from the students' comments was related to how the learners could replay the course, as shown in the following two descriptions:

S14: Online course allows me to learn repeatedly. Therefore, I can enhance my own learning through replaying the course as many times as I needed.

S23: The best part is we can view the course repeatedly. We can always repeat the part that we don't understand.

It seems that these students like the recorded sessions as they could repeat the course so that they could understand better the learning content.

D. Enhanced awareness of learner autonomy
Some of the students also mentioned how DL has been beneficial in allowing them to learn autonomously. As the three students mentioned in their reflections:

S18: I think online learning is great for *improving* autonomous *learning*… Using this teaching model could help us to *take more responsibility for our learning*.

K42: I personally like online learning a lot as I can *arrange my* own *learning time autonomously*.

S9: This way of learning allows me to *maximize my learning*. Also, it also helps me to *improve my self-control ability*.

Despite the above positive feedback, the learners also raised their issues in relation to the online course. Two main themes emerge from the students' written reflection.

A. Lack of teacher support

There are students mentioning their feelings about not having the teacher around. Here are two extracts from their feedback:

S3: When I had questions about the learning materials of the online course, I *can't ask the teacher right away*. I had to write them down first because *I could only see the teacher when we have face-to-face sessions*. To me, this is a problem of online course.

S23: The problem is *not being able to discuss with the teacher* there and then.

B. Lack of self-discipline:

Another problem the students encountered is to do with their self-discipline. As the two students wrote:

S22: Once I am busy at work, I *tend to forget to go online to take the course*.

S49: For online course, because I don't have to go to school, *it is easy to forget about taking the online course*.

These descriptions have reflected on Hutt's (2017) notion regarding lacking self-discipline.

Although the students did mention their feelings about lack of direct contact with the teacher, one student mentioned (S41) 'When I asked the teacher through emails, the teacher always replied swiftly.' This indicates this issue could be easily dealt with once the students find alternative ways to contact the instructor.

Teacher's Reflections on the Course

For the instructor, at least three challenges were observed during the implementation of the course. The first issue is related to the lack of in-person interaction between the teacher and the student. Accordingly, there was a delay in terms of the students' communication with the teacher. As mentioned earlier, one of the students' negative comment regarding online learning is not being able to ask the teacher questions while taking online course. However, this challenge seems to be unavoidable due to the unique feature of distance courses. Besides, the students have to use the university's online learning platform so that their learning records could be kept. In this regard, there were restrictions in terms of the size limit of the online course and the format of the acceptable digital teaching materials. Therefore, the teacher was not only constrained by the types of tools he/she could use, but also needed to learn the suitable software in order to meet the requirements of the digital platform the university provides. The final challenge is related to the students' approach to taking the course online. As the students were allowed to arrange time for their online courses, it was found that only few students started to take the course right after it was released online. The majority of the students seemed to take the course more intensively when the examination dates were approaching. This shows that the students seem to take a more reactive approach to taking the online course.

Suggestions for Future Teaching

Based on the challenges faced by students and teachers in the two distance courses, the authors propose some possible solutions for future teaching and course designs.

In the first course, Workplace English, the students highlighted their lack of self-discipline, which is in line with Bijeesh's (2017) finding, leading to forgetting to take online classes or to submit assignments. This resonates with the teacher's observation about students' reluctance to submit assignments in the early phase of the course. In order to respond to this challenge, teachers can remind students through different communication tools and increase reminder frequencies. While only one student in this course expressed confusion about how to complete assignments despite watching course videos, it echoes the teacher's difficulty unable to understanding individual student needs. To address this, teachers can design collaborative learning activities (Stoytcheva, 2017), encouraging students to assist one another as a team and actively ask questions when they are in need. Additionally, personalized guidance and additional explanations for course content can also be provided. Regarding students' desire for face-to-face physical classes, teachers can increase the frequency of synchronous online sessions to create more teacher-student and student-student real-time interactions. This can help students form a learning community (Wenger & Synder, 2000) in which a sense of belonging can be developed, further promoting and consolidating online learning (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Finally, to overcome the character limit for giving assignment feedback on the

course platform, teachers can explore alternative communication channels such as asynchronous email or synchronous online meetings, ensuring that students comprehend the comments.

From the teaching practice of the Business English Writing Course, the students seem to hold more positive feedback than negative one. For the issue of students' concern regarding lack of teacher support, possible solutions could be including alternative contact system such as organizing a social media messaging group (such as Line or Facebook Messenger) for the students to ask questions or encouraging the students to form small study groups so that they could help each other when encountering learning problems. As to the issue that the students might forget to take online courses, the mentioned solution of using social media messenger platforms could also provide additional reminders in addition to the regular digital notice board messages and email reminders the instructor posted on the digital platform.

In terms of dealing with challenges the teacher faced, it seems the organization of a chat group for the students could be of help in terms of the lack of interaction. For the second challenge regarding the restrictions of the digital platform, teachers may have to learn about how to employ the university digital platform more efficiently. Finally, to deal with the challenge that the students tend to take a more reactive approach to taking online courses, the teacher could focus on the design of the learning materials. For example, creating group assignments with deadlines for the online sessions could be of help in encouraging the students to learn collaboratively.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to provide suggestions for future distance course design by reflecting on the students' and teachers' experiences in the two selected distance courses related to the theme of business English. It was found that there were similarities in the feedback from students and teachers in both courses. Most students appreciated the flexibility of DL and believed that taking distance courses could enhance their learner autonomy, such as time management and repeated learning. However, the students also expressed that distance courses made them feel the lack of self-discipline and desire to interact with teachers and classmates in physical courses. From the teachers' perspective, they also encountered some common challenges, such as limited interaction with students, low student participation, and restricted use of course platforms. Therefore, it can be concluded that both students and teachers crave for more

interaction opportunities in distance courses. In future distance course design, in addition to using course platforms, teachers can use other diverse communication channels to communicate with students and design collaborative and interactive activities to enhance student interaction and participation.

While this paper provides some pedagogical applications for teachers in DL and course design, there are some limitations. Only two distance courses related to Business English were selected for reflection in this paper, and the teachers' and students' perspectives were restricted. In the future, more relevant distance courses or the ones in other subjects can be included for observation and reflection to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' and teachers' needs in distance courses. Thus, more complete suggestions for distance course teaching and design can be given.

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🌱 作者簡歷

姓　名：	王怡茜 ／Wang, Yi-Chien
現　職：	致理科技大學應用英語系助理教授
學　歷：	國立高雄師範大學英語學系博士
經　驗：	致理科技大學應用英語系助理教授
研究專長：	新聞英文、英文寫作、職場英文、商貿外語簡報

姓　名：	高淑華 ／Kao, Shu-Hua
現　職：	致理科技大學應用英語系副教授
學　歷：	英國諾丁翰大學教育學院哲學博士
經　驗：	致理科技大學應用英語系 助理教授
研究專長：	English Language Teaching, English for Specific Purposes, Learner Autonomy