DISTANCE LEARNING DURING MOMENTS OF CRISIS:
OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS OF ONLINE
INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Nadia TOUATI
Mohammed First University, Morocco
Supervised by: Dr. Abdeljabbar ELMEDIOUNI
nadiatouati990@gmail.com

Abstract:
The ongoing COVID 19 pandemic has shown that distance learning is no more regarded as a mere luxury or just a complementation to in-person learning. It is increasingly being considered by educationalists as an important source and asset of education, especially within the context of the twenty-first century education and the different ICT and soft skills it requires. Starting from a number of webinars and trainings I did during this period, and based mainly on a personal online training at Harvard university’s edX platform on ‘Family Engagement in Children’s Education’ that lasted four months, this paper attempts to explore the potential that online learning and training represents for learning and teaching English. Specifically, emphasis will be on dissecting the formal and content qualities of successful online course designing. Finally, the paper will end with a discussion of some results and recommendations for educational practitioners as to material selection and design of distance learning.

Key words: Distance language learning, Online instructional design, ICT, Course development.

Introduction:
Recently, there has been an increasing awareness among researchers and educational practitioners of the importance of integrating distance learning in the educational curricula. The on-going Covid19 pandemic has rendered such a need all the more urgent. Distance language learning curricula requires specific syllabus design with specific formal and content qualities. A poor-designed online course often confuses online students, loses their focus, and makes them feel frustrated. (Chen, 2016). Hence, a pedagogically effective online instructional design is indispensable for the current and future education, and demands for integrating ICT in education alongside the implementation of virtual classrooms are increasing over time. Drawing from different theoretical backgrounds, this paper seeks to explore the theoretical considerations a well as a set of components that should be an integral part of effective online language course design. The paper will start by a brief review of some definitions of what syllabus design means, followed by a short discussion of the most well-known models of elaborating and constructing a syllabus for language teaching. The third section will be mainly devoted to the recent developments in syllabus designing with particular focus on online course designing, while the last section will be a detailed analysis of a sample drawn from a personal online training on "Introduction to Family Engagement in Education' available on edX Harvard platform. The aim here is to highlight the different considerations and requirements for a more effective online course designing. The paper will end with some implications and recommendations that could, hopefully, further our thinking of how to construct attractive, motivating and more effective online courses that move beyond paper and classroom situations.
1. Syllabus design: A theoretical background

1.1. Instructional design: Some definitions

Instructional or syllabus design is generally defined as ‘a statement which identifies the elements of the curriculum, states what their relationships are to each other, and indicates the principles of organization and the requirement of that organization for the administrative conditions under which it is to operate’. (Hilda, 1962: 421) According to Johnson, there are three notions of syllabus design: first, an arrangement of selected and ordered learning outcomes intended to be achieved through instruction, second, an arrangement of selected and ordered experiences to be provided in an instructional situation, and third, a scheme for planning and providing learning experiences (Mauritz, 1969). Moreover, Graves defines instructional syllabus as the planned structure of a single course (within a program) that outlines specific course goals, requirements, readings, assessments, and scheduled assignments across the length of the course (Graves, 2000). Syllabus design, therefore, consists of the process of selecting the appropriate course materials, organizing syllabus content, learning/teaching objectives, and evaluating.

Hutchinson and Waters identify the following purposes of instructional language syllabus: first, to break language down into manageable units and provide a practical basis for textbooks and instructional blocks. Second, to provide teachers and learners with moral support. Third, to reassure students and/or sponsors that a course has been well planned; that is, its cosmetic role. Fourth, to give both students and teachers an idea of where the course is going to act as an implicit statement of the views held by the course designers regarding language and language learning—telling students not only what they are to learn but why to guide the selection of materials, texts and exercises. The fifth purpose aims to ensure an element of uniformity across a school or educational system. Finally, to assist in assessing how successful a student has been during a course by providing a basis for testing (Waters, A., 1987: 83-84).

Tomlinson, in his turn, emphasizes the following purposes as the guiding principles of language syllabus design:
• To provide a rich experience with varying genres and text types.
• To provide a pleasing experience through beautiful art and design.
• To use multimedia for rich and varied language learning.
• To help learners make discoveries for themselves.
• To help learners become autonomous language learners.
• To provide extra materials for extensive listening and extensive reading.
• To help learners personalize their language learning (Tomlinson, B. 2008).

In addition to these fundamental purposes, Tomlinson stresses five prominent components that are useful for the measurement and assessment of the reliability of syllabus design. These could be briefly listed as follows: Novelty, variety, attractive presentation, appealing content, and achievable challenge (Tomlinson, C. A., 2011: 8). Indeed, as all the above mentioned scholars emphasize, it has been proven in practical teaching situations that the characteristics sketched previously are indispensable for making the process of teaching and learning more reliable and more appealing for learners from different backgrounds.

1.2. Approaches to Language Syllabus Design: A brief overview

Language syllabus design has undergone tremendous changes over time depending largely on the theoretical frames that have underlined different theories and approach to language learning and teaching. In her study, Karl Krahneke identifies six major approaches to language teaching syllabus design that she divides into form-based and meaning-based

On the one hand, we encounter three form-based approaches to syllabus design. To start with, based on linguistic and psychological theory, the structural (formal) syllabus focuses more on the forms and structures, usually grammatical, of the language being taught. Yet, this understanding of language and the syllabus design that would come out from it have been widely criticized. According to Ellis, for instance, teaching within this approach may have very little effect on when and how learners may or may not learn a structure because each student learns differently (Ellis, 1986). In the same vein, (Widdowson, 1978) argues that because over-focus on grammar teaching separates learning from real-life contexts, the true meaning of a language item is often lost and the ability of the learner to use language for communicative purposes is severely limited. Second, the notional / functional syllabus is one in which the content of the language is a collection of the functions that are performed when language is used. Since the course design is organized in terms of notions, focus is mainly directed towards learning vocabulary. This approach was also subject to criticism. In this regard, Nunan contends that breaking language into small pieces misrepresents the nature of communication (Nunan, 1988: 37). In short, the notional functional syllabus is as synthetic—and therefore, problematic. For this and other reasons, syllabus design has seen a shift towards the situational syllabus, which is composed of a collection of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs or is used. The primary purpose of a situational language teaching syllabus is to teach the language that occurs in situations. Situational syllabus is designed in such a way to provide 'realistic' situations based on a communicative view of language and experimental theory of language learning (Ehsan Abbaspour, 2013).

On the other hand, meaning-based syllabus approaches have emerged to cater for previous lacunae and foster the communicative aspect of language. These new frames are in turn divided into three different categories. The first approach is dubbed as 'skill/competency' based syllabus. This type of syllabus focuses mainly on developing the four major skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading. The underlying objective is to develop the learner’s four skills so that he/she becomes able to properly read a text, write a comprehensible piece of writing, give an oral presentation, and understand the spoken language. The second approach is known as 'task-based' instruction in which the content of the syllabus is organized around a series of complex and purposeful tasks/activities that students need to perform to show that the learning outcomes are met. It, therefore, should be a procedural syllabus based on teacher-selected tasks that are assumed to promote the language acquisition process, while downplaying the learning of pre-selected linguistic content (Tagg, 2011). For this reason, Edwards and Willis point out that teachers, comfortable with a grammar-based syllabus, may actually be hostile toward task-based learning because of the lack of control over language usage and linguistic outcomes (Edwards, 2005: 27-28). As for content-based instruction, it is defined as the “integration of content learning with language teaching aims. More specifically, it refers to the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material.” (Brinton, 1989: vii) Its primary purpose, the argument goes, is to teach some content or information using the language that the students are learning. Some of the drawbacks of content-based instruction, as Faravani suggests, may arise from the fact that ‘finding suitable content may prove to be difficult depending upon the composition of the students’ needs. It may not be also suitable for younger and novice learners' (Faravani, 2018: 19).

1.3. Post-method pedagogy and syllabus designing

Postmodern pedagogy has seen light as a consequence of the dissatisfactions with the
limitations of the previous methods to syllabus design, particularly in relation to teaching language. This also entails a rethinking of commonly held conceptions about how language should be taught. Thus, there has been an increasing demand for going beyond the limitations of the concept of ‘method’ towards more open and effective teaching strategies (Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 537). According to Kumaravadivelu, postmodern pedagogy consists of three pedagogical parameters: particularity, practicality, and possibility. By particularity, he urgently recommends that language pedagogy be relevant and 'sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu' (Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 538). Practicality pertains the relationship between theory and practice. By this pedagogy, he attempts to overcome the gaps existing between ‘theorists’ "theory-versus-teacher’s" theory and encourage teachers to theorize from their practice and practice from their theories’ (Kumaravadivelu, 2001: 541). As for possibility, which is essentially about a pedagogy which is implicated in relations of power and dominance, legislation and institutions, it remains out of the scope of this paper.

Drawing on Kumaravadivelu’s pedagogy of particularity, Douglas suggests the following conception of syllabus design model. For him, planning a lesson is embedded in a much larger framework. Given this, it could be argued that his syllabus design model widens and adds significantly to the previous models outlined above. This model is based on eight integral components. These are situation analysis, needs analysis, problematizing, specifying goals, conceptualizing a course syllabus, selecting textbooks, materials and resources, assessment, and course revision (Douglas, 2015).

1.3.1. Online syllabus design: New approaches to syllabus design

Alongside the above-mentioned course designing trends that are centered mainly on the textbook and in-person learning as the core basis for teaching and learning, distance learning and online instructional design are growingly emerging and developing into a distinct field of its own. It has emerged at the intersection of varied academic disciplines such as psychology, system theory, computer technology and communication. One immediate implication of these recent developments is that instructional design is shifting our focus from 'traditional' behaviorist to cognitive-constructivist conceptions (Cuesta, 2009: 182).

Since distance education is “an educational process and system in which all or a significant proportion of the teaching is carried out by someone or something removed in space and time from the learner,” (UNESCO definition) it requires the following characteristics: Structured planning, well-designed courses, special instructional techniques, and methods of communication by electronic and other technologies (Mary, 2011: 9).

Distance education, and web-based instructions in particular, have emerged in response to critical need for specific models for online syllabus design. The early precursors of this type of models date back to the 1970s, when Florida State University’s Center for Educational Technology developed the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation) as part of a military training project by the US armed forces (Branson, 1978). In spite of providing a valuable checklist for Syllabus design, ADDIE model has been criticized for being linear and not flexible, and does not encourage inspiration (Quin, 2010).

Similar to the ADDIE model, Dick, Carey and Carey’s revised model (the system’s approach model) is more detailed and provides specific steps to course design. This model comprises ten major principles that could be summarized in the following order: identify instructional goal(s), conduct instructional analysis, analyze learners and contexts, write performance objectives, develop assessment instruments, develop instructional strategy,
develop and select instructional materials, design and conduct formative evaluation of instruction, revise instruction, design and conduct summative evaluation.

Indeed, formative evaluation, which remains one of the biggest challenges in distance learning, is at the heart of this model, allowing designers to continually revise the program as it is created and through its implementation (Hebert, 2017: 4). According to Dick, Carey, and Cary, the system’s view of instruction stresses the important roles of all the components inherent in the process. They must all interact effectively, just as the parts in a system of diabetes care must interact effectively to bring about the desired outcomes (Carey, 2015: 2). Hence, incoherent instructional design may give rise to many problems. Although the Dick, Carey and Carey’s model incorporates tools from different theoretical backgrounds, it provides an open approach in the sense that most instructional design practices advocated in the model, when used by expert professionals, are essentially neutral. Teachers and instructional designers can translate their own views of learning theory into pedagogical practices based on their own decisions about goals, students' needs, and learning environments.

Drawing from the previous models, Siragusa, Dixon, and Dixon (2007) suggested the IDOL model (Siragusa, 2007). The model, proposed for higher education instructional designs, put forward three main steps: analysis, strategy and evaluation. The model developed presents 24 pedagogical dimensions for designing an online course. However, it has been criticized for being inefficient to use alone in course design, as it can be used only alongside other instructional design models (Chen, 2016: 2304).

Li-Ling Chen’s ICCEE model is another freshly delivered model for online syllabus design. It presents five major principles: identify, choose, create, engage and evaluate. This model is characterized by its linear and simultaneously circular order of its components, the fact that maximizes the efficiency of an online instructional design according to the author (Chen, 2016: 2305). Li-Ling Chen's model can be regarded as an expansion of the previous models. The model in hand, alongside the previous ones, can be strictly criticized primarily for not addressing students' motivational factors in online instructional design.

While the previous models target the methodological constituents for course design, Keller’s (2016) ARCS-V model, based on a synthesis of motivation concepts (Keller, 1979) creates a more simplified and motivating course design model. The model incorporates five components: attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction and volition (Keller, 2016: 4). The first four items provide a basis for aggregating the various concepts, theories, strategies, and tactics that pertain to the motivation to learn (Keller, 2016). It has been revealed later that these categories do not consider differences as to students' persistence. Accordingly, the fifth category of volition was added. As maintained by Keller, volition is similar to Zimmerman’s (2001) self-regulation and rightly embraces variables and strategies related to persistence.

The implementation process in online instructional language design seems to be daunting. Critics of online instructional design regard the basic models as too generic for beginner users who seem to be unable to use them without the assistance and support of an experienced designer (Hebert, 2017). This implies that the establishment of well-designed instruction is highly dependent on well-planned team work. Collaboration between teachers, instructional designers, administration, and students would enrich and provide a fertile ground for a highly-structured language syllabus, in terms of both content and structure.

Moreover, the unexpected lockdown that has resulted from Covid 19’s sudden outbreak has confronted teachers with the need to adapt to online teaching via specific platforms. To do so, teachers and students need to have some ICT competencies. These latter are referred to as the “knowledge and skills that the workers need to be able to perform tasks related to the information society” (Cuesta, 2009: 186). As claimed by Hernández (2005), in “every project,
participants must have a minimum of competencies in order to be familiarized with online environments, and also maintain a positive and active attitude to manage the systems and services used” (Cuesta, 2009: 186). Therefore, it becomes imperative to provide some prerequisite pre-service and in-service training of teachers as to the use of technology and language instructional design, in particular, in order to cope with the ongoing crisis spurred by Covid 19 pandemic. Hence, students’ needs, age and level should be taken into account when designing such online training programs.

1.3.1.1. Authenticity of materials

For online instructional design to be successfully delivered and reliably evaluated, it should be necessarily made up of authentic materials. In a world that has become massively invaded by image and sound, we need to develop a ‘visual’ strategy in teaching. Research has revealed that the use of ICT is a motivating factor in learning a language, as they can easily and attractively incorporate more authentic materials, allowing for learners to choose the suitable pace for their own learning (Stickler, 2015: 13-12). In this context, Antoniadou and colleagues (2011) argue that language learning platforms “provide a valid context in which language has a real communicative and interactive purpose, which helps the informants learn by interacting with other multilingual and multicultural counterparts” (Stickler, 2015: 13). In teaching languages, therefore, visual aids like pictures and videos are ultimately regarded as fruitful interactional instruments that may significantly contribute to the creation of potent teacher-learner, learner-learner and learner-machine interaction. Well-chosen and properly organized visual aids are capable of stimulating students’ motivation and learning needs.

1.3.1.2. Roles of teachers and learners in online language teaching

The communicative approach has tremendously contributed to radical shifts in conceiving of teachers' and learners' roles. Thanks to inroads in the communicative approach to language teaching, focus has largely shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered conceptions. Unlike 20th century traditional approaches to teaching/learning which considered the teacher as knowledge holder and generator and the learner as mere receiver, the 21st century teacher is more and more thought of as “an academic professional who guides the students’ learning process by fostering autonomy and stimulating their constructive and analytical attitude towards the processes that are oriented” (Cuesta, 2009: 188). As mentioned by Hernández (2005), an online teacher’s role is to promote, communicate, motivate, socialize, and facilitate (Cuesta, 2009). With this in mind, the learner’s role has automatically shifted from a passive to an active and participatory one. This shift ultimately helps him/her achieve increased expertise much needed for lifelong learning.

1.3.1.3. Evaluation

It has been argued that the continuous teacher’s intervention and assessment, with major modifications, are two essential constituents that contribute to the learners’ success in the course and their satisfaction in the newly adopted learning mode (Cuesta, 2009). As already revealed in the previous models of online syllabus design, formative assessment is of great importance for fulfilling the learners' needs and motivating them to ensure their engagement. Such kind of assessments, aligned with positive reinforcement, can be considered as an encouraging interactional pattern in teacher-learner, learner-learner or learner-machine interaction.
2. Analysis and discussion: Harvard course on "Introduction to Family Engagement in Education" as a case study.

Established in 2012, edX massive online open courses have paved the way for millions of learners worldwide to unlock their potential and become change makers (Agarwal, 2012). Today, edX learning platform has more than 110 million enrollments, 3000 courses, 15 thousand instructors, 35 million users, 160 partners and 1.4 million verified certificates issued. Through building, partnering, and promoting a software platform that brings together the best universities from all around the world, edX attempts to create courses for everyone, everywhere in the world, enhance teaching and learning online and advance teaching and learning through research.

Harvard University’s course on "Introduction to Family engagement in Education" is an asynchronous self–paced course laid down on edX platform. The course targets the relationship between school and family and its impact on the educational success. Even though the course is not language-based, the way it is designed can inspire language learning instructors and designers to establish a reliable language learning syllabus, hence its presence in this paper.

This course is divided into nine major sections. Each section, in turn, is divided into three, four or sometimes five subsections. Every subsection starts with a written outline, course objectives as well as a written and video-recorded overview, and ends up with question-oriented discussion and an obligatory learner reflection on what has been learned. Moreover, the learner is ongoingly assessed throughout the course, and moving to the next section is only possible after the learner demonstrates understanding and active interaction with the different participants whether these are the course curators themselves or the peer learners. More than that, by the end of every subsection, learners need to successfully pass a well-administered quiz composed of twenty questions.

The first introductory section starts with an introductory video, in which the course designer(s) deliver a general introduction to the course and its components. The video is followed by a written document where most course goals and expectations are set. Then, a brainstorming activity (word cloud) is presented. In what follows, the learner should introduce him/herself and states the reasons behind taking this course, and the knowledge he/she hopes to get out from it and the prior knowledge he/she has about it, if any. The learner would ultimately introduce him/herself to all the participants attendant to the course. Then, a set of recorded videos of researchers and specialists are offered with the aim of informing the learner with initial definitions and thoughts from the field. This introductory section ends up with a pre-course survey whose aim is to allow the teaching team to know more about their learners and help them better prepare their course content.

There are different types of materials used during the teaching of this course. Beginning with a short overview in each section, the course presents different types of videos. Some videos are introductory, as they clear the way for learners about what will be taught in the next stage. Other videos are informative, as they include interviews with specialists, teachers, parents and students. Others hand over documentaries and case studies conducted about the subject matter. These videos are supported by simultaneous subscription and video playback speed, so as non-native speakers could easily follow the speaker. They are also accompanied with links to download both the video and the transcription in case of limited internet access. Furthermore, learners are provided with must-read articles and books. Along with this, additional resources for optional readings are offered.

Formative evaluation is given its due weight throughout the whole course. Some recorded video courses, informative ones particularly, are ended up with multiple choice questions to check the learner’s comprehension. As for reading activities, they are directed with some pre-
reading questions that the learner needs to think about beforehand and summed up with self-assessment. Peer assessment manifests in the discussion that occurs by the end of each section. Prompted with some questions, the learner is encouraged to share his/her thoughts by responding to, at least, two other learners on the discussion board. These questions are not limited to the course content only, but they stem from real life situations and the learner’s own experiences. Finally, the learner’s feedback about the section’s content and materials is needed as a kind of teacher’s evaluation.

The last section is dedicated to recommendations to superintendent learners. The instructor delivers her final words and advice to learners and recommends extra resources for further research. In a recycling manner, the course ends up with the same activities it started with, a word cloud activity and the closing course survey. As a last step, the course is crowned with a word from the president and chair board about the work they do and some suggestions to further it better.

2.1. Implications and recommendations:

Based on these theoretical and practical discussions, this paper has sought to show that online language syllabus design is transforming the ways we tend to think about language learning and teaching. These most recent developments have pointed the need to start rethinking 'traditional' approaches to syllabus design towards more innovative paths that could make the best of the huge opportunities that the internet and ICT are offering to learners and teachers.

For a course design to be effective and motivating, it needs to be based on different theoretical underpinnings. A model that takes into account multiple intrinsic and extrinsic factors, which interfere directly or indirectly in the process of teaching and learning languages, may succeed in establishing a well-designed online syllabus. This means that a multidisciplinary approach, an eclectic one which takes from behaviorism, cognitivism, structuralism, communication studies, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, computer science, to name only a few, would be probably vital for the success of online language syllabus design.

For distance learning to properly engage real life teaching and learning experiences, it is vitally important to involve motivating virtual materials to attract the students' attention and target their needs flexibly. The objective is to mitigate the negative factors engendered from loneliness while learning and establish anxiety-free environment, to use Stephen Krashen's words. Furthermore, a well-designed instructional language syllabus should be an amalgamation of practical and methodological instruments along with the psychological aspects in the process of learning. Many learners in distance education face a host of intrinsic (lack of confidence, being uninterested with, or feeling bored with, the course content), or extrinsic motivational challenges (personal or family problems). Simultaneously, teachers, too, are faced with motivational obstacles and problems related to the tactics and strategies they can use to motivate students in this critical context of virtual learning.

Motivational challenges can be addressed through selecting effective, operative authentic materials. Since the 21st century learner has become almost absorbed by the new means of communication, learning materials need to correspond to the requirements of learners’ real life experiences. It would be useful and more motivating, therefore, to transfer learners from the traditional ways of learning to more sophisticated ones with highly stimulating authentic syllabus materials; materials that catch learners' attention and ensure their learning engagement. Examples of these materials are videos that insert interviews with language specialists and experts who may better contextualize the language learning processes. This may be enhanced
further by including videos with language teachers and practitioners, and case studies from successful language schools to benefit from their experiences. Digital stories, which combine texts, images and audio files, are also useful for improving second language learners’ oral, listening and written skills (Oppermann, 2011). In addition to ensuring a much wider audience than the classroom peers, for instance, Oppermann rightly argues that these digital stories and audio files have their positive impact on teaching pronunciation and boosting listening skills.

Authentic materials alone are not sufficient for designing a satisfactory syllabus design, but the way they are arranged is likely more critical. In this respect, there is a need to select the appropriate material based on the objectives of learning that are already agreed upon by both the instructor and the learners. For instance, if their aim is to enhance the listening skills, then the audio tapes and attractive digital stories are probably the best materials to be chosen. As for improving the oral skills, it is recommended that the instructors push learners to take part in peer discussion which should be already oriented by carefully chosen questions. It is advisable that these questions, in turn, should be deeply related to learners' real life experiences. Targeting learners’ life experiences would possibly motivate learners and impel them to share their views and argue for their opinions and beliefs.

Evaluation is another pivotal element for an adequate language syllabus design. As already revealed in the previous parts, assessment (formative, self-directed) plays a pivotal role in both teachers and learners’ appraisal. It, in fact, monitors students learning through the ongoing feedback that helps both learners and teachers to situate themselves and pick out their strong points and target their weak ones so as to work on them. Evaluation also serves as a source of knowledge, and a reminder that engraves information in learners' minds. Last but not least, it helps instructors and syllabus designers to decide on areas that require reform in the process of course revision.

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