

Questionnaire for Implementing Open Distance Learning for English in Engineering

SUZANA CARMEN CISMAS

Department of Modern Languages and Communication
The Polytechnic University of Bucharest
313 Splaiul Independentei, sector 6, 060042, Bucharest
ROMANIA
suzanacismas@yahoo.com

Abstract: - This questionnaire has been prospecting the Romanian learning market for ten years, within the time frame 1999-2009, in an attempt to identify significant dissatisfactions with the traditional instruction framework in the field of foreign languages in engineering. At the same time, it has focused on the proportion of students' options (irrespective of age) for English teaching on web-based platforms, together with the limitations and improvements that may emerge in this domain. It has been connected with European developments from the very beginning, as I participated in a EU funded Leonardo da Vinci program entitled: *Recipes for successful e-language teaching, Guidelines for the implementation of effective and dynamic language teaching in ODL environment.*

Key-Words: open distance learning, web-based English teaching in engineering, questionnaire, learning market

1. Introductory definition of concepts

Conventional e-learning systems are based on instructional packets delivered to students using Internet technologies. The role of the student consists in learning from the readings and preparing assignments. Assignments are evaluated by the teacher. In contrast, the new e-learning places increase emphasis on social learning and use of social software such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and virtual worlds. The first 10 years of e-learning focused on using the internet to replicate the instructor-led experience. Content was designed to lead a learner through the content, providing a wide and ever-increasing set of interactions, experiences, assessments, and simulations. By contrast, new e-learning is built around collaboration. It assumes that knowledge (as meaning and understanding) is socially constructed. Learning takes place through conversations and interactions about problems and actions. Advocates of social learning claim that one of the best ways to learn something is to teach it to others. There is also an increased use of virtual classrooms (online presentations delivered live) as an online learning platform and classroom for a diverse set of education providers.

Social networks have been used to foster online learning communities around subjects as diverse as test preparation and language education.

Distance Education ranges over four to five generations of technology in its history (print, audio/

video broadcasting, audio/video teleconferencing, computer aided instruction, e-learning/online-learning, computer broadcasting /web casting). The increasing popularity of mp3 players, PDAs and Smart Phones has provided an additional medium for the distribution education content, and some professors now allow students to listen or even watch video of a course as a Podcast. Distance learning is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional systems design that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically "on site". It is a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance. It intends to create an educational experience of equal qualitative value for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom. Rather than attending courses in person, teachers and students may communicate at times of their own choice, by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in real time and through other online modalities. Distance education courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason including the taking of examinations is considered to be a hybrid. It provides opportunity and flexibility for both school-age and adult learners to study a wide range of courses (compulsory, optional, print or web based). This form of education also provides students with support by email or phone. It uses a

variety of technologies to assist students including: audio teleconference, recording of classes, corresponding with an instructor between classes by email or phone. The courses are only available to students attending standard school or an adult learning center. While being delivered through the internet, some courses are taught by a teacher who may be off-site. Assignments are submitted online by students to teachers, and a final examination is written on site. Synchronous technology is a mode of online delivery where all participants are *present* at the same time, requiring a timetable to be organized. Web Conferencing is an example of synchronous technology. Others include video-conferencing, web based VoIP, telephone, and web conferencing, online chat sessions or a virtual classroom or meetings. Virtual classrooms and meetings can often use a mix of communication technologies. Asynchronous technology is a mode of online delivery where participants access course materials on their own schedule. Students are not required to be together at the same time. Message board forums, e-mail, audio cassettes, printed materials, voice mail, fax, DVDs, blogs, wikis, and recorded videos are examples of asynchronous technology. This system may be an effective alternative for people who want to study but cannot attend the classical type of lessons. The reasons that hinder their presence in the traditional classroom are diverse: distance, family problems, current job, daily schedule, personal rhythm of learning (either too slow or too fast), boredom in a numerous class with students of various levels, an illness or a difficult temper. The advantages are: wide access (it can reach underserved populations of students unable to benefit from the educational services they desire, because of the distance), new market opportunities (supports lifelong learning, providing access to learners of all ages), adaptability to new technology and environments (educational institutions may adopt distance education as a means to adjust to the rapid changes in the technology in use today).

2 Problem Formulation: prospecting the learning market to identify ODL opportunities. Questionnaire 1999-2009

The main focus of this approach lies on the degree of interest and knowledge students and teachers manifest towards Open Distance Learning. E-activities are both adaptive and collaborative, having, therefore, increased didactic value. They provide student-centered accelerated learning material, which promotes self-paced accelerated learning in its turn. It can be used to reinforce what

has been learned in the classrooms, but it can also be used as a remedy, in order to help learners with limited language proficiency.

The Questionnaire

2.1 Preliminaries

1. What age group do you belong to?

a) 20 – 25	d) 35 – 40
b) 25 – 30	e) 40 – 45
c) 30 – 35	f) 45 – 50

2. Can you speak other foreign languages?

3. If any, what languages do you speak or have you spoken simultaneously?

4. If any, what languages have you studied at the same time?

5. At the moment are you studying two foreign languages simultaneously? Which ones?

6. Are you interested in the English language materials on the market? Mark your options.

- dictionaries
- courses in grammar, literature, culture or civilisation
- translations
- bilingual volumes
- exercises and grammar compendium
- conversation guides

7. Are you connected to an English speaking environment?

8. How do you face the challenges of an English speaking environment?

9. Are you interested only in acquiring the foreign language skills, or do you want to find out more about that culture, about the business opportunities and about the distinctive lifestyle?

10. To what purpose are you learning English? Tick your options:

- to keep up with new developments in your profession
- to pass a standard test
- for a scholarship or a specialisation course
- for professional re-conversion
- for a part time job (tourist guide, occasional translator, etc.)
- for your general cultural background
- for a certificate that will facilitate a better job or a promotion
- to help a family member (your child, for example)

- to better handle business and official documents
 - to enjoy entertainment opportunities (music, movies, English language TV channels such as CNN, Discovery, Animal Planet, TCM, Euro News)
 - others (please specify)
11. What are the near future purposes you plan to achieve by means of ODL?
 12. What profession were you trained for?
 13. What used to be your previous field of activity?
 14. What is the professional area you intend to re-direct to?

2.2 Preference for e-learning English

15. What are the reasons why you do not attend traditional courses?
16. How do you rate your own level of knowledge in English (beginner, intermediate, advanced?)
17. How long can you concentrate with good results on only one activity?
18. How do you organise your learning effort?
19. How much time do you spend on revisions?
20. How much time would you allot to traditional learning?
21. How much time do you intend to spend on ODL in the context of your present duties?
22. In view of your personal experience, what is your opinion about the traditional lesson structure?
23. What aspects hindered your learning in the traditional teaching framework?
 - the materials were never available in time
 - the layout and the design of the materials were not appropriate for your level
 - the materials did not provide balanced activities to stimulate your skills
 - there was less communicative output to be derived from the materials
 - the new language was not introduced in motivating and realistic contexts
 - the course supports did not encourage meaningful language practice
 - the subject and the content of the materials were not relevant for your purposes
 - the content of the materials was not
 - realistic
 - interesting
 - varied
 - challenging
 - the materials created harmful stereotypes
 - the materials did not reflect the multicultural nature of modern society

- the materials did not point to clear objectives
 - the materials relied too much on translations
24. What improvements would you make in the traditional lesson structure?
 25. What aspects do you find useful within the traditional teaching framework?
 26. What were the circumstances in which the use of auxiliary didactic materials impressed you and facilitated your learning?
 27. What is your opinion about homework (opportunity of language practice, utility, form)?
 28. Do you think that the present usual methods of evaluation are efficient?
 29. What improvements would you suggest in the evaluation system?
 30. Are you satisfied with the degree of interaction between students and teachers within the traditional learning framework?
 31. Do you think you need more co-operation and monitoring from
 - your teacher
 - other teachers
 - other students?
 32. How do feed-back and learning control affect you?
 33. How often do you need feed-back and evaluation for optimum learning?
 34. Does feed-back motivate and stimulate you more in you learning?
 35. Which are the personal aptitudes that facilitate your study within the ODL framework?
 36. Have you used such aptitudes in traditional learning as well?
 37. How does the computer change your perspective regarding your own work and achievements?
 38. How does the computer-based learning change your attitude towards
 - your teachers
 - your peers?

2.3 Material support

39. In your opinion, what material support is required in ODL?
40. Do you think that the lack of an adequate material support would prevent you from participating in ODL?
41. Is the price of the materials something you can afford?
42. Do you have free access to a computer?
43. Do you communicate by e-mail?
44. Do you have your own e-mail address?
45. Do you have ready access to the Internet?

46. How did the computer influence your learning?

2.4 Personal conclusions

47. Which are the reasons why you prefer ODL to traditional learning?

48. Which are your expectations regarding ODL?

49. Which other questions would you suggest?

2.5 Accessing information in ODL

50. How and where from did you find out about ODL?

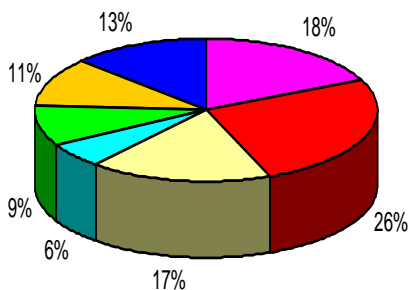
51. What aspects of ODL would you want to know better?

52. Which are, in your opinion, the modalities of making ODL better known to the public?

3. Problem Solution. Interpretation of data from the time interval 1999-2009

The questionnaire required general answers, encompassing the learning process, and no deeply personal details were provided by the interviewees.

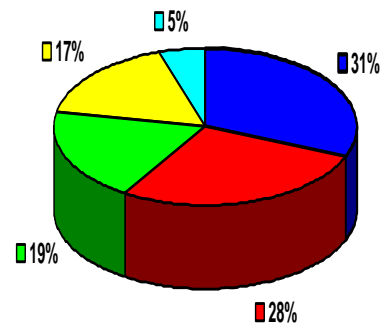
- 78 % could speak two foreign languages (conversational level at least)
- 7 % were studying two foreign languages simultaneously at that moment; one option was English and the other was either French or German
- 85 % considered the computer a familiar working tool
- The most popular English language materials on the market were the dictionaries, the conversation guides and the exercises with grammar compendium (64 %). The percentage is relevant for the old fashioned approach to learning that most mature learners still prefer.



- Dictionaries
- Conversation guides
- Exercises with grammar compendium
- Bilingual books
- Literature, culture and civilization manuals
- English without teacher manuals
- Others

- Only 3 % had to currently face an English speaking environment
- 95 % had a clearly developed personal learning style and a substantial cultural background.
- 83 % rated traditional learning as more time consuming
- 70 % did not need close monitoring, frequent control or much feedback
- 30 % needed English for keeping up with the new developments in their profession
- 28 % needed English for scholarships and specialisation courses
- 20 % needed English for professional re-conversion
- 17 % needed English for better handling official documents

Here is a representation of these categories:



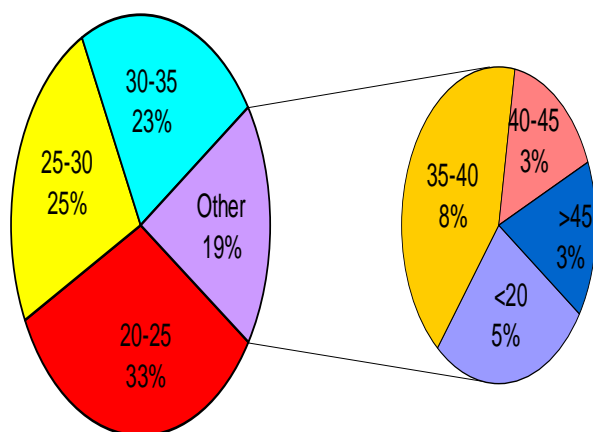
- keeping up with the new developments in their profession
- scholarships and specialisation courses
- professional re-conversion
- better handling official documents
- others

This field research demonstrated that there are many learners who would choose web-based learning for obtaining a university degree, but there are others, even more numerous, who would choose this system for acquiring a second degree or specialization that might help them change their career or their profession altogether. Other potential students need to improve their level of knowledge in their present field of work, or they want to get a different part time job, therefore they only need a certificate, and to this purpose they select ODL as less time consuming, especially because they already have the necessary background of knowledge to successfully pursue the course. Whatever the reasons and circumstances, one

conclusion is clear: the age group that is most interested in ODL ranges from 20 to 35.

- The interviewees were mostly students, didactic personnel and young professionals. 80 % belonged to 20 → 35 age group

Here is the age distribution:



In multimedia programs, listening is combined with seeing, similar to the real world. Students also control the pace and the path of the interaction, which is in the foreground, although many programs also provide links to explanations simultaneously. More recent research has favored a learner-centered explorative approach, where students are encouraged to try different possible solutions to a problem.

The reasons for using computer-assisted language learning include: experiential learning, motivation, enhancement of student achievement, authentic study materials, greater interaction, individualization, independence from a single source of information, and global understanding.

The barriers inhibiting the practice of computer-assisted language learning can be classified in the following categories: financial barriers, availability of computer hardware and software, technical and theoretical knowledge, and acceptance of the technology.

A number of studies have been done concerning how e-learning affects the development of language learners' four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Most students report significant gains in reading and listening, and most programs are geared toward these receptive skills because of the current state of computer technology. However, most reading and listening software is based on drills.

Gains in writing skills have not been as impressive, as computers cannot assess this well. However, using current technology, even with its limitations, the development of speaking abilities has gained much attention. There has been some success, in particular in the computer-mediated communication; it helped speaking skills closely linked to the communicative competence (the ability to engage in meaningful conversations in the target language) and also provided controlled interactive speaking practice outside the classroom. Using chat has been shown to help students routinize certain often-used expressions and promote the development of automatic structures which help develop speaking skills. This is true even if chat is purely textual. The use of videoconferencing gives not only immediacy when communicating with a real person but also visual cues, such as facial expressions, making such communication more authentic. However, when it comes to using the computer not as a medium of communication (with other people) but as something to interact with verbally in a direct manner, the current computer technology limitations are at their clearest.

4 Conclusion

In many educational models, the writing community and the communication channels relate with E-learning and M-learning communities. They both provide a general overview of the basic learning models and the activities required for the participants to join the learning sessions across the virtual classroom or even across standard classrooms enabled by technology. Many activities, essential for the learners in these environments, require frequent discussion sessions in the form of virtual classrooms and/or blog meetings.

This study shed more light on teachers' roles in web-based foreign language teaching in engineering. Although the integration of computer assisted language learning into a foreign language program can lead to great anxiety among language teachers, researchers consistently claim it changes, sometimes radically, the role of the teacher, but does not eliminate the need for a teacher altogether. Instead of handing down knowledge to students and being the center of students' attention, teachers become guides as they construct the activities students are to do, and help them as they complete the assigned tasks. In other words, instead of being directly involved in engineering students' construction of the foreign language, the professor interacts with students primarily as a facilitator in using the target language (grammar, vocabulary, formal/informal styles) that arise when interacting

with the computer and/or other people. Elimination of a strong teacher presence has been shown to lead to larger quantity and better quality of communication such as more fluidity, more use of complex sentences and more sharing of students' personal selves. However, teacher presence is still very important to students when doing e-activities. Teachers should be familiar enough with the resources to be used to anticipate technical problems and limitations. Students need the reassuring and motivating presence of a teacher in e-environments. Not only are they needed during the initial learning curve, they are needed to conduct review sessions for reinforcing what was learned. Encouraging students to participate and offering praise are regarded as highly important by students. Most students report preferring to do work in a lab with a teacher's or tutor's help, rather than do it completely on their own.

It was also relevant for the shift in students' roles in web-based foreign language teaching in engineering. Students, too, need to adjust their expectations and their participation in class. Rather than passively absorbing information, learners must negotiate meaning and assimilate new information through interaction and collaboration with someone other than the teacher, be that person a classmate or someone outside of the classroom entirely. Students must also learn to interpret new information and experiences on their own terms. However, because the use of technology redistributes teachers' and classmates' attentions, less-able students can become more active participants in the class because class interaction is not limited to the one directed by the teacher. Moreover, shy students can feel free in their own student-centered environment. This will raise self-esteem and improve knowledge.

This emerging technology is becoming widely used in universities and institutions around the globe. With the recent trend in technological progress, distance learning has become highly valued for its potential in providing individualized attention and communication with students worldwide.

References:

1. Babbie, E., *The Practice of Social Research*, The Free Press, 1992
2. Bales, F.R., *Interaction Process Analysis*, The M.I.T. Press, 1991
3. Berthier, N., Berthier, F., *Le Sondage d'opinion*, Librairies Techniques, 1998
4. Converse, J.M., Presser, S., *Survey Questions, Handcrafting the Standardized Questionnaire*, SAGE Publications, 1996
5. Frey, J.H., Oishi, S.M., *How to Conduct Interview by Telephone and in Person*, SAGE Publications, 1995
6. Gordon, R.L., *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics*, Homewood, Dorsey, 1999
7. Hammersley, M., *What is Social Research?*, The Open University Oxford, 1993
8. Hammersley, M., *Social Research, Psilosophy, Politics and Practice*, SAGE Publications, 1993
9. Javeau, C., *L'Enquête par questionnaire*, Editions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2001
10. Patton, M.Q., *Quantitative Evaluations: Methods*, SAGE Publications, 2006
11. Summers, J., *Attitude Measurement*, Rand McNally & Company, 2008