

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS TRAINING IN THE CONTEXT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN CANADA

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Abstract. *The article discusses the problem of foreign language teachers training in Canada in the context of distance education. It outlines the educational opportunities of distance training of teachers at Canadian educational establishments and answers the questions how the educational process changes in relation to traditional approaches to teaching and learning, what opportunities foreign language teachers can get through distance education programs and how the ICT changes the roles and relationships of learners and teachers.*

Key words: *foreign language teachers training, distance training, information and communication technologies, online education*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, Canada has been experiencing a revival of interest in foreign language education. In Canada foreign language teachers are considered among the best trained teachers; the status of the teaching profession is explained by the role teachers play in the multicultural society. Teaching is a highly valued profession, and admission to educational institutions is very competitive. This factor increases the prestige and respectability of a teaching degree. It should be emphasized that methods and forms for teaching foreign languages have developed greatly over the past decades. It is connected with modern educational trends and approaches. Modern day education is more and more innovative, accessible, and suitable. The barriers of time and age have been removed and geographical boundaries do not matter anymore. Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) and the transition towards more knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies create new challenges for greater online and open delivery in higher education.

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING TRANSFORMATION

The problem discussed in the article is much talked about in pedagogical studies (Barbour 2012; Clifford 2014; Founder 2014; Hamilton 2013; Murphy 2012). Edward Hamilton and Norm Friesen believe that "online education originally emerged as a key area of transformation in teaching and learning at a time when higher education was experiencing a set of crises that fostered a particular view of what technology could and should do and what its trajectories of development should be". Shrinking budgets, mounting calls for relevance, increasingly crowded classrooms – amidst these difficulties,

online education was framed as a turn-key solution that could create new revenue streams, reduce dependence on costly human resources, expand access, and integrate education to postindustrial society (Hamilton 2013 : 16).

3. RESEARCH PROBLEM

According to Michael K. Barbour, Canada was one of the first countries to use the Internet to deliver distance learning courses to students and in many ways Canada is a more interesting exemplar than the USA for the rest of the world. This is in part due to its division into 13 provinces and territories of widely varying population; it is also in part due to Canada being not only a strong member of the Commonwealth of Nations, leading naturally to comparisons with other English-speaking countries, but also via in particular (but not only) Quebec being linked to la Francophonie, leading to relevant role models for two major linguistic regions and finally, via its offerings to indigenous communities, it provides a role model for other countries who may not always take the same care with provision of education to their indigenes and minority populations (Barbour 2012 : 3).

In this study, the focus is turned onto foreign language teachers training in the context of distance education in Canada. Thus, the aim of the article is to outline the educational opportunities of distance training of foreign language teachers at Canadian educational establishments. Therefore, the following research questions are addressed:

- How does the educational process change in relation to traditional approaches to teaching and learning in Canada?
- What opportunities can foreign language teachers get through distance education programs?
- How does the ICT change the roles and relationships of learners and teachers?

4. TRANSFORMING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Firstly it should be noted that distance based learning provides additional opportunities in response to diverse learning needs, explores new forms of information and communication technology in support of collaborative teaching and learning. Distance based learning has the potential to transform educational practices – it leads to the student-centered pedagogy. The globally desirable trend of shifting from an emphasis on teaching to learning is a complex task for both teachers and students. It involves a complex process of changing structures in the education system. P. Bergström states that "one catalyst for changing structures is the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in education and society" (Bergström 2011).

For example, e-learning is highly relevant and applicable to the current and future work of the Ontario College of Teachers. The College presently accredits fully online additional qualification courses. The College's regulatory objects related to standards and ongoing professional education align with and support the new "teaching e-learning" additional teacher qualification. This qualification is intended to enhance the professional knowledge and practices of educators involved in diverse modes of distance education (Barbour 2012 : 22).

In Nova Scotia online high school courses provide a full range of services including:

- a centralized learning content management system;
- video conferencing;
- interactive objects, video streaming/downloading and other multimedia resources;
- training and support for online teachers;
- professional development and resources for classroom teachers, technical support, etc. (Barbour 2012 : 43).

In the 21st century the range of technologies available for use in language learning and teaching has become very diverse and the ways that they are being used in classrooms all over the world have become central to language practice. So, a Canadian distance education program was implemented in Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia to teach English as a second language using the telephone. Due to using audiotapes students can easily work through units in a workbook; the teacher provides the student with feedback and oral practice over the telephone. Ray Clifford argues that "the success of distance learning in developing students' foreign language skills depends on the ability of the instructional program to provide language learning in face-to-face settings". This capability can be provided through two-way satellite communications that allow teachers to communicate with students and to provide the interaction required for development of language skills (Clifford).

5. TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Let us take into consideration the University of Victoria, one of Canada's leading universities, providing students with a unique learning environment. At the University of Victoria distance education programs offer diverse courses for teachers on a flexible schedule using different formats (online, face to face, evening, etc.) and offer a wide range of credit and non-credit educational opportunities designed to meet students' needs, to shape their professional knowledge and skills, to achieve their professional ambitions (University of Victoria 2014). Program staff provides a student with directions on how to access the course and where to buy course texts and other required materials, supports the use of course learning tools like Moodle, Elluminate, blogs and wikis, helps a student carry out online research and locate library materials, provides a set of helpful resources on academic reading, critical thinking, academic writing and communicating online.

Teacher professional development programs at the University of Victoria provide teachers with many different professional development options:

- FSL in Middle School Credential (allows students to gain the skills and knowledge to be more effective as a middle school FSL teacher).
- Professional Specialization Certificate in Teaching French Immersion (is designed for in-service and pre-service teachers and allows acquiring the unique skills, methodological knowledge and French language fluency to be a highly effective teacher in the French Immersion environment).
- Teaching English as a Foreign Language (is designed for EFL teaching professionals who are non-native speakers of English).
- Teaching English as a Foreign Language for Native English Speakers (is for native speakers of English and those with native-like skills who seek an "authentic"

teaching experience where they will take full responsibility for a group of learners in a foreign language context in an overseas country. It provides the skills needed to teach confidently and to help in finding employment with a respected school. It offers a strong foundation of theoretical knowledge which will be used to construct practical, hands-on activities for immediate use in the English as a foreign language context) (University of Victoria 2014).

Besides there are a plenty of undergraduate credit courses offered at The University of Victoria. These courses are offered in a distance learning format that allows working professionals and others to complete courses without attending face to face classroom sessions.

Answering the second question addressed in the article, it should be said about Canadian Virtual University (CVU) – a partnership of Canada's leading universities offering 250 degrees, diplomas and certificates and 2000 courses completely online and through distance education. Its goal is to help students in Canada and around the world quickly find quality-assured online education. To be a teacher in Canada one requires a bachelor's degree in education (B.Ed.) and a provincial teacher's certificate (professional license to teach). Currently, Canadian Virtual University does not offer an English language B.Ed. completely at a distance, but they can help a student meet the admission requirements for on-campus B.Ed. programs across Canada. A bachelor of education in French is offered completely through distance education for those intending to teach French immersion or in French schools. One way to use distance education to help a student become a teacher is to complete up to two full years of courses through distance education and then transfer the credits to an oncampus B.Ed. program. The second option is to complete a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree through distance education, and then take a two-year post-baccalaureate (or after-degree) program oncampus. Through distance education one can take some teachable subjects such as English composition or literature, languages (French, German, Spanish, and Cree) and others (Canadian Virtual University 2014). For example, Advanced Spanish Grammar Course is taught distantly at Athabasca University, The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. It is an individualized online course centered on a learning resources package and a personalized schedule within the time allowed to complete the course. The staff provides assistance with technical problems related to internet connectivity and access to the website, problems related to understanding the organization of the course and other requirements (Canadian Virtual University 2014). Other courses foreign language teachers can take distantly are Advanced French Methodology (which includes an in-depth analysis of the nature and purpose of the French program, a brief overview of the history of French teaching methodologies, an introduction to the research literature, an evaluation of techniques, and a consideration of issues facing the teaching of French); Intermediate German (which is designed to further develop students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills through the use of authentic materials); Introduction to Spanish (which is designed for students with little or no knowledge of the language to begin their study of Spanish at the university level). The full list of distant language subjects and the description of each taken course is provided directly at Canadian Virtual University official website (Canadian Virtual University 2014). The specific of each language course is that they emphasize a communicative approach to acquiring language skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking and introduce you to the diverse cultural contexts in which the language is spoken emphasizing the cultural differences.

The last question addressed in the article asks how the ICT changes the roles and relationships of learners and teachers. Firstly, it changes their interactions. The distance courses provide students with the opportunity to work independently. The students acquire an active role in the learning process – they have to cope with the added responsibility for their learning, to dispose of suitable learning strategies: self-organization, elaboration, critical examination and retrieval, strategies of planning, controlling and regulating the own learning processes. The role of a teacher is facilitating this process and interacting with each student via modern technologies. Thus online pedagogy focuses on the activities of the learners and observes the educational process from the point of view of support, cooperation and the student-centered approach.

7. CONCLUSION

The arrival of new forms of distance learning based on information and communication technologies has a great pedagogical significance and economic implications. Moreover, distance education intensifies globalization and interrelations around the globe. Distance learning within foreign teacher education is a powerful tool for expanding learning opportunities and for fostering knowledge creation and mobilization.

Distance learning is becoming an extremely popular option for would-be-teachers interested in getting their foreign language training in Canada. It won't replace every aspect of traditional education (workshop, face-to-face learning), but the benefits of distance learning – its flexibility and independence – make it an attractive choice to consider. The educational opportunities of distance training of foreign language teachers at Canadian educational establishments are rather wide and variable. The idea of distance learning of foreign languages entered the Canadian educational mainstream long ago. The establishment of Canadian Virtual University marked the further development of distance learning era. A great variety of language programs and courses has been developed to meet the growing needs of distance learners responding to their demands for flexible learning environment, continuing education and lifelong learning.

With the arrival of the information and communication learning technologies the roles and relationships of learners and teachers have also drastically changed. The educational process has become more individualized, learner-centered, flexible, open and globalised. There is no denying the fact that these changes can lead to the emergence of a new educational paradigm.

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