Chapter 12

Interaction in Distance Education:
A Cultural Critique of Instructional Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Education is a product of the objects and actors in the process of interaction. Interaction is, therefore, an important factor that affects the quality and sustainability of education. For this reason, this section will focus on interaction and its theories and approaches which are a popular and versatile concept in distance education. In the first part of the chapter, the concept of interaction will be discussed with different dimensions and components. Interaction in the following section will be examined within the framework of Moore’s Theory of Transactional Distance, Anderson’s Interaction Equivalency Theorem, and Gorsky and Caspi’s Theory of Instructional Dialogue. At the end of the chapter, the nature of the interaction in distance learning will be discussed in the context of the studies on instructional dialogue and the cross-cultural comparisons will be addressed to the issue of the role of interaction in distance settings.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education appears to be a quite popular education option for adult learners by its main features such as access to education material and flexibility in time and place. Distance learning has certain limitations as well as these superiorities. Many of these, such as not having a generally configured learning culture, physical distances between individuals, demand for a high level of discipline and autonomy, absence of a known learning atmosphere, reduction of face-to-face communication between individuals,
and more emphasis on internal communication have been mentioned in literature (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006). Among these, it has been stated that “interaction” is one of the most important elements that influence learning and a learner (Moore, 2001; Picciano, 2002). Interaction is a concept that has continued to be discussed from many different aspects and defined in a variety of ways. This chapter focuses on interaction concept by its theoretical and practical reflections in the context of distance education and in the final part, its influence on distance science and language learning are discussed within the scope of culture.

BACKGROUND

Interaction Concept in Distance Education

The concept of interaction has been deemed as one of the key components of distance education (Boyle & Wambach, 2001; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004; Wagner, 1994) and has been the topic of numerous research so far (Beldarrainoa, 2006; Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994; King & Doerfert, 1995). Although the fact that interaction is a versatile and complex concept (Anderson, 2003) has prevented researchers to reach a consensus on a clear-cut definition, interaction has been defined as “influencing each other mutually (reciprocally)” in the simplest sense. If we are to describe it more clearly, interaction expresses the ability of individuals, objects or event to influence each other reciprocally (Wagner, 1994). Wagner has emphasized that the influence referred to in the interaction process is bilateral and at least two actors (acts) and two objects are required for this process (p.8). This explanation is a very clear and simple definition since it reflects *mutual message transmission*, which is one of the main components of interaction, and the process materializes *with more than one actor*. On the other hand, Simpson and Galbo (1986) have pointed out to different characteristic of interaction and have defined this concept as “relations that include endless variety in mutual actions”. Although this new attribute expands the scope of the conceptual definition of interaction, it is questionable how accurate it would be to talk about an endless and unlimited number of relationships in the context of education, especially in formal education environments between an instructor and a student. Moreover, when we are talking about learning environment, especially distance education media, we have to consider not only the interaction between individuals, but also between an individual and intelligent systems (computer, technological appliances and machines). Anderson (2003) has pointed out that the interaction that the individual will build with an inanimate asset would be more limited as compared to human-human interaction, regardless of how much technology advances and the functions of appliances and machines get more diversified. Therefore, Wagner’s definition has received wider acceptance in the literature in the sense that it also includes interaction with unmanned appliances and point out to the capacities of both actors (or objects) to influence each other in the process of communication. From the perspective of distance education, which offers opportunities to learn as independent of time and space, interaction has a quite important place in configuring knowledge. Thus, it is crucial to examine the current research and applications on this issue, in order to understand the role of interaction in the field.

The three varieties of interaction proposed by Michael G. Moore have constituted one of the most important discussion and research theme of the distance education literature since 1980s. Furthermore,
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