Asynchronous Online Foreign Language Courses

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INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia (USG), in collaboration with a number of its member institutions, began developing a fully online set of courses that allows a student to complete a core curriculum that is transferable across the USG. The result of this effort is the USG's eCore® Program, developed by the Advanced Learning Technologies (ALT) unit of the USG. The eCore® Courses were created using a collaborative course development process that engaged teams of USG faculty, technical support and an instructional designer from ALT. The collaborative course development process was utilized in order to take full advantage of the expertise of the team members and to incorporate multiple perspectives of the content into the courses. In addition, a set of guidelines for the development of eCore® courses was established to ensure the courses were of the highest quality possible. The eCore® course array was developed over a period of seven years. While many of the courses were well suited to the asynchronous online approach, there were content areas that were more controversial, such as physics, chemistry and foreign languages, due to the highly specific requirements in each of these disciplines.

The last courses to be developed for the USG's eCore® Program were two that comprised the Intermediate Spanish sequence. This course development process began with an intensive examination of the viability of an online language course by a team of content experts from a team of USG Foreign Language faculty. Foreign Language (FL) courses, by nature, must incorporate exposure to the target language and extensive practice communicating in that language. Technology is increasingly becoming an integral part of the FL classroom as students use computer-medi-ated communication (CMC) to practice the language with their peers, instructor, and native speakers of the language via chat rooms and message boards. The following discusses the development and implementation of the Intermediate Spanish levels I and II courses for the USG eCore® Program.

BACKGROUND: COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (CALL)

The study of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), an emerging topic for educators and researchers, has provided language instructors and learners a great realm of possibilities in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Warschauer (1997), in his study "Computer-Mediated Collaborative Learning: Theory and Practice," provides a succinct review of relevant research in the second half of the twentieth century, confirming the relationship between the significant increase in investigation in the 1990s with the advent of the internet and the rise of the accessibility of computers. Warschauer firmly asserts that online communication "encourages collaborative learning in the classroom" (p. 472). Some of the more salient studies (Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997; Kinginger, 1998, Abrams, 2003; Poza, 2005) emphasize the advantages of incorporating CMC into face-to-face language courses. Kern contends that:

new medium-specific conventions . . . compensate for the absence of prosodic and paralinguistic features found in face-to-face oral communication. For example, facial expressions such as smiles [:-) 1, frowns [ ):-(1, or winks [;-)] become icons, and tone of voice is represented by capitalization, underlining, exclamation marks, and other symbols. (p. 459)

Many researchers agree that text-based computer conference technologies create a setting in which students experience a decrease in anxiety when compared to face-to-face conversation (Beauvois, 1994, 1996, 1999; Kivela, 1996; Lee, 2004; Meunier, 1998; Skinner & Austin, 1999; Warschauer, 1996). In addition, research shows that students indicate they feel a significantly lower fear of negative evaluation via the computer (Beauvois, 1996; Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992; Kivela, 1996).

Recent advances in computer conferencing technologies expand communication from simple text-based tools, such as email, chat rooms, or bulletin boards, to voice-based technologies, further enhancing the language learning environment by allowing students to communicate with their own voices on their own time. Little research exists concerning the use of voice tools for CMC in foreign language classes; however a recent doctoral dissertation, "The Effects of Asynchronous Computer Voice Conferencing on Learners' Anxiety When Speaking a Foreign Language" by Poza (2005) provides an in depth study of the many advantages of online oral interaction. Poza's research utilizes an asynchronous voice web board developed by Wimba, a software company dedicated to the online education market. As defined by one of the co-founders and former CEO of the company, K. W. Ross (2003): "Asynchronous voice is the interactive communication process of people leaving voice messages for other people and the other people responding to their voice messages" (p. 60). The results of Poza's investigation reveal that "a number of students experienced reduced anxiety attributable to both the elimination of the time pressure of the classroom, as well as the opportunity to edit their contributions before posting them to the voice board" (108).

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING ECORE® INTERMEDIATE SPANISH I AND II

In the spring of 2003 The Foreign Language Team (FLT) was formed to investigate the efficacy of an online eCore® Spanish course. This team was made up of USG Spanish, French, German and English faculty. The FLT report, (Barron, et al., 2003) was a comprehensive evaluation of the "state of the art" of online language education and offered a set of specific

recommendations for developing asynchronous online language education courses for the USG eCore® project. The report began with the following:

This report examines issues surrounding the implementation of 2000 level online foreign language courses and makes specific recommendations to the University System of Georgia regarding implementing such courses as part of its eCore® program. In our examination, we consider outcomes and standards, pedagogical approaches, instructional materials, technology, teaching activities, and transferability issues.

The central challenge in designing an online foreign language course is to use technology effectively to assist in developing the students' skills in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding. A related challenge is to create an online course that will effectively assess the students' performance and growth. (p. 2)

In addition, the FLT recognized the importance of students having a foundation in the target language prior to taking online courses This resulted in the implementation of the eCore® Spanish courses at the intermediate level with a prerequisite of elementary Spanish in a traditional classroom setting.

While this report provided an important framework for the eCore® Spanish courses, the actual development of the courses would be a greater challenge. Beginning in April, 2004 a team of four Spanish language faculty, an instructional designer and a programmer began to develop the courses. As the FLT report emphasized, skill development and assessment were crucial components of any successful language course.

The first challenge was to determine how the oral aspect of language education could be accomplished in an online environment. The FLT recommended several possible technologies including Wimba, a suite of "voice tools" specifically designed for online language education, a voice enabled web conferencing program called Elluminate, as well as telephone and tape recorded audio sessions. After careful consideration, Wimba was adopted because of its ease of use, asynchronous application, and compatibility with Blackboard Vista, the course management system used within the USG. Wimba allows students to record their oral exercises and post them to a "voice board" where they can be retrieved by the instructor for review and comment. In addition, the application includes voice email, a

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