Technology in the Foreign Language Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

America is a country made up of people from all corners of the globe. Although this is the case, few Americans can communicate in a language other than English. The major reason for this is that Americans do not study foreign languages to any great extent in school, and those who do, have not developed a facility to speak the language they have studied. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages found, in its survey entitled "Foreign Language Enrollments in U.S. Public High Schools, 1890-2000," that there was a steady decline in the numbers of students studying foreign languages from 1976 to 1994. From 1995 to 2000 this trend was reversed and the number of students learning new languages in the year 2000 almost matched that of the enrollment for 1974. However, this still only accounted for 42.5% of the total number of students attending American high schools (ACTFL, 2004). A possible explanation for this low number may rest in the methodology used to teach foreign languages in our schools. (Brecht, 2002).

BACKGROUND

The Evolution of Technology in Foreign Language Teaching

The approach used for teaching foreign languages in the past was to provide the student with enough vocabulary and grammar so that they could read a language. Speaking the language was not as important as reading it. The current philosophy in language instruction emphasizes speaking over reading. Today to meet this end every effort is made to engage the students in more productive activities, resulting in greater use of communication skills. A way to do this is to incorporate more technology in the foreign language classroom. Technology, for the purposes of this discussion, will consist of software programs, the Internet and distance learning satellite transmissions.

The use of technology in foreign language teaching began over 60 years ago. Starting with the use of language labs by the military in World War II, the utilization of technology has gotten much greater since then. From 1950 to 1980 the teaching of foreign languages entered what has been called the "Age of Methods". Language labs with their interconnected tape recorders moved from the military setting to high schools and colleges. During the 1960s and 1970s, the audio-lingual method, in which the student imitated correct pronunciation by listening to native speakers on tape recordings, became the rage in foreign language instruction (Rodgers, 2001). The use of videotape based language programs became popular in the 1980s. The most famous of these was the Capritz series for learning the French language entitled "French in Action". It was also during the 1980s that the computer as a device for enhancing language study appeared. Initially, consisting of simple vocabulary development programs, this technology expanded to include complete language learning programs, authoring programs for teachers, and computerized language lab systems (Earp, 2001). In the 1990s the advent of distance learning opportunities through language programs broadcast and received over satellite transmissions added to the technological possibilities in foreign language instruction.

The applications of technology in the teaching of foreign languages today fall into three major categories: basic language instruction; reinforcement of language skills; and enhancement of the target language. Each of these categories is open to multiple applications of technology. Each of them have available support from computer programs, Web sites and satellite transmissions. What follows is a discussion of each of these aspects of teaching a foreign language and how technology can augment that teaching.

BASIC LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Basic language instruction deals with the acquisition of a new language. Three fundamental modes of delivery exist in using technology to accomplish this. They are: software programs; the Internet; and distance learning, using a program of instruction transmitted via satellite. Each of these has special requirements, advantages, disadvantages and potentials. There are numerous software applications on the market today that aid the individual

student in learning a new language. There are two ways to use them. First, the teacher can place students in a computer lab setting and share the instructional disk through a file-server. All of the students may then receive the basic instruction at the same time. In this approach the teacher will need to receive special training in the operation of the program. It is also advisable to have a trained computer aid on hand to help with the operation of the program. A second possibility is to have students work individually in an independent setting to learn the language. In this situation the teacher acts more as a mentor than as a primary instructor. The advantage to the CD-ROM program approach is that the student can proceed at his/her own pace and not be restricted by the progress of other students. A major disadvantage to this technique is that if the students are studying the language as individuals, there is no one with whom they can interact, especially in practicing the oral skills of the language. Two excellent sources for information on software applications of this nature are Applause Learning Resources (Web site: *applauselearning.com*) and Teacher Discovery Company (Web site: *teacherdiscovery.com*).

The Internet is also a source of opportunities for learning a foreign language. The same practical considerations listed for using software programs also apply to the use of the World Wide Web. Having computers available that can access the Internet is a must if one is to use this resource. The configuration of these computers is the same as for the software packages: they may be used in a lab setting for group instruction of the language, or as individual stations for one-on-one learning. In either case the need for a teacher or a mentor is also the same. There are two major Web sites that offer foreign language course instruction. The first of these, about.com, is the most comprehensive one, offering the greatest number of languages. The full address for the site is *http:// (the language you want).about.com/homework/(the language you want)*. For example, if you were looking for the program that teaches French, you would enter: *http:// french.about.com/homework/french*. The languages offered on this Web site include: Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Russian and Spanish. Parlo.com is another site that offers instruction in French, Italian and Spanish. The address for this site is *www.parlo.com*. As with the software applications, a teacher should be present to monitor the students.

The final possibility for teaching a foreign language is to use one of the distance learning offerings sent by satellite transmission. The major provider of this service is the Satellite Educational Resources Consortium (SERC). SERC was the pioneer in offering foreign languages via satellite transmission. It offers instruction in high school level German, French, Japanese and Latin. It also provides

a Spanish program designed for elementary and middle school students.

There are several factors that one must attend to when using this technology. The most important of these is the obtaining of the equipment necessary for the operation of the program. A satellite dish must be purchased, located in an appropriate place at the school, and protected from vandalism. Reception and distribution equipment are needed to acquire the signal from the satellite dish and to channel the program to a specific classroom. A television monitor, speakerphone and a dedicated phone line are also needed in order to operate the program successfully. The dedicated phone line and speakerphone facilitate the two-way communication between the students and the teacher presenting the course. Finally, it is essential that someone be trained in the proper operation of the entire system.

REINFORCEMENT

Reinforcement is the process by which learned material is ingrained to a greater depth. It increases retention of the subject matter. This is especially important in the study of foreign languages, where learning is cumulative. Technology can achieve this goal and focus student attention to a degree often superior to regular classroom instructional techniques. Once again, there are three major formats through which this can occur: software programs, the Internet and satellite transmissions.

Most foreign language textbook series come with computer disks containing exercises that are drill and practice in nature. These are specially designed to reinforce concepts, usually grammatical and vocabulary, covered in the chapters and units of the textbook. Basically they consist of students manipulating objects or statements presented with well-developed graphics, usually with sound accompaniment, to complete the exercises. Self-tests are typically part of the program and students can obtain instant feedback on their performance. The teacher can use these programs, either as a general reinforcement for the entire class, or as a tutorial for individual students. In addition to programs that come with the textbook, other sources are also available. Offerings appear in several formats: drill and practice for grammar, vocabulary builders, reading comprehension programs, dialogues, puzzles and games. A wide variety of packages of this nature for classes in German, French, Latin and Spanish are available in the catalogues of the Discovery and Applause Companies.

Another option for reinforcement is to access programs on the Internet. Many textbook companies have a Web site related to their foreign language series. These

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