

Sabbatical: Online Spanish

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Abstract

Can students learn languages online? Are there technologies available that enable instructors to engage in true face-to-face interaction via computers? My sabbatical sought answers to these questions in order to responsibly assess the feasibility of offering a fully online language program.

My research focused on ways that we, as educators, can integrate technology in the Foreign Language classroom without sacrificing true communication. To accomplish this I interviewed dozens of colleagues, read articles, attended conferences, talked to publishers and examined different course management tools. I also spent a great deal of time studying the elements that make up a successful language program to determine exactly what obstacles we may be facing. In this paper, I discuss some of the challenges unique to language instruction and also why face-to-face communication is essential to responsible language teaching, regardless of the method of delivery.

In my conclusion I present my recommendation, namely, that teaching Spanish online is indeed possible and that we should prepare ourselves by purchasing a communication software program, such as Horizon Wimba or Elluminate, so that future online students will be able to engage in face-to-face conversation with classmates and their instructor. We must also begin training people to teach with this new technology. Finally, we should install and maintain a few dedicated computer cubicles on campus equipped with computers, microphone-headsets, webcams, and internet to make sure all of our students have access to the necessary technologies. In the meantime, it is my opinion that we should continue to experiment with new technologies, in both the traditional and hybrid environments.

Introduction:

In this brief I will outline the findings of my sabbatical project which began in August 2007 and ended in January 2008. In reality, the latter merely reflects the date of this report because the project itself will go on indefinitely, though with less intensity. I mention this, because the more I delved into this topic the more I realized there was to learn.

I will begin by explaining the research I undertook and my interpretation of that data. I will then discuss the special needs inherent in a Foreign Language Program, followed by the problems we face as we consider moving instruction into the online arena.

In my conclusion I will attempt to convince the reader that responsible online language courses are indeed possible, even advantageous. I will not go so far, however, as to suggest the immediate implementation of fully online courses and will explain this seemingly contradictory statement.

I. Sabbatical Proposal and Project Description:

My sabbatical project sought to investigate the feasibility of teaching Spanish (and other foreign languages) in both online and blended formats.

My two main objectives during my sabbatical were to: (1) Investigate how language courses are currently being taught, and assess their feasibility for implementation in the District; (2) Research what course material is available for teaching Spanish in a blended and/or online format; and (3) Create an online resource for Spanish instructors.

I spent the majority of my time during the Fall 2007 semester surveying and interviewing colleagues, learning new technologies, attending conferences, webinars, and workshops, and reading books and articles. The information I came away with, instead of being definitive, has left me with as many questions as answers. What I learned, in short, was that there are a number of technology related tools available that can make teaching languages online possible. Before we review those tools, it is important that we discuss the needs that face language instructors.

II. The technology: A look back:

Language teachers were some of the first to harness technology. The first innovation caused a sensation at the end of the 19th century when Edison introduced the phonograph. For the first time, students were able to hear native speakers with different dialects. In the 1930s a similar situation occurred with the introduction of the radio. This was followed by the tape recorder which revolutionized the discipline and led to thousands of schools installing language labs so that students could hear their own voice. The next revolution came in the middle of the century with the television, said to be “the new miracle in education”. The computer is the latest technology to make the scene, and they have become so ubiquitous that more than 76% of Americans claim to own one. The Internet and the Worldwide Web are offering students opportunities like never before. A student in San Diego can just as easily speak with a friend in Buenos Aires as they can with one in a nearby town. Students can view and exchange photos and videos in minutes, they can read books, take tests, submit papers, all from the comfort of their homes. Why then, do most foreign language instructors not embrace online learning? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at what really happens in a language classroom and what makes language classes different from other disciplines.

III. The pedagogy

Though there is no one “correct” method of teaching foreign languages, it is generally accepted that students learn better in a “natural” setting, where communication is the top priority. (This is why Study Abroad programs are so successful. Participants are forced to live, eat and breathe the language and culture, without the interference of their native language.) Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell published numerous books and articles on this Natural Approach, which changed the focus from rote memorization and choral repetition to learner centered communicative

activities. The principal aim, according to linguists such as Krashen and Terrell, should no longer be on form but on function--that is on the application of newly acquired structures. What is more, grammar and vocabulary, they claim, need only be taught as they become necessary for the communicative activity in question. *Comprehensible input* became the new buzzword, and instructors were now expected to supply large amounts of the target language and culture. Purists even went as far as to ban the use of the native language from the classroom.

Popularity of this *Communicative Approach* grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and is still considered by many to be the best way to teach foreign languages. In recent years, however, teachers have begun to move to a more eclectic method that incorporates innovative techniques, many of which harness the power of computers and the Internet.

Learning a language, regardless of the teaching methodology, requires the development of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and communicative strategies in the skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and culture. To augment these skills, many institutions offer additional outside opportunities so students can practice their newly acquired skills in real-life situations. These include language clubs, community service learning and study abroad programs.

Ideally, in a traditional classroom setting, students learn and study vocabulary and grammar before coming to class with the help of the textbook (as well as online resources), then apply these newly acquired skills in class with classmates and help from the instructor. The role of the teacher is to come up with creative ways to engage students in such activities. The instructor becomes more a coach and mentor—a *guide on the side*, if you will, rather than a lecturer—a *sage on the stage*. I point this out because this shift, from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach, requires much more creativity on the part of the instructor and involves many challenges when attempting to replicate this process online.

This leads us to the question, can a communicative-based approach be transferred to a strictly online environment? The answer is *yes* and *no*. It is fairly easy to deliver (push) the information to the students, thanks to recent online textbooks, workbooks, and lab manuals. Many publishers even offer “supersites” where students can access audio and video materials, listen to native speakers, record their own voices, work through tutorials, take quizzes, even communicate with the teacher. This covers much of the grammar, reading, listening and culture. What is lacking, however, is the face-to-face interaction, the true *communication*, which most language teachers believe is sacrosanct. It is this last ingredient of language courses that have either forced online language instructors to limit communicative expectations or turn away from the online platform completely.

I surveyed a number of language teachers to get an idea of the general sentiment pertaining to online learning. I was not surprised to find that most of my peers use at least some technological enhancements, usually PowerPoint, electronic grading, and Course Management systems such as Blackboard or WebCT. What was a little shocking was that there seems to be resistance by many of my colleagues to implement fully online courses. The reasons are varied, but one question seems to be present on everyone’s mind, and goes back to our earlier topic: *How are you going to replicate face-to-face communication in the online environment?*

In my opinion, there are three possible solutions to this situation. The first way is to continue to teach in the traditional fashion. Another possibility is to teach using a blended format, taking advantage of the rich online opportunities without sacrificing the personal contact of the classroom. The third is obviously using the exclusively online approach, taking advantage of new technologies that allow teachers and students to interact with each other, face-to-face, using special software and webcams. I will go into the latter in more detail later, but what is important to point out at this venture, is that it is possible, even preferable to offer all three of these options.

Online solutions to face-to-face interaction:

When it became clear that I was searching for a platform that would allow virtual, synchronous audiovisual communication between and amongst teachers and students, I narrowed my search. I discovered a few products that can offer direct, face-to-face communication, but they all are either limited in scope and functionality or are very expensive. Below I will describe these solutions in more detail.

There are a number of free programs available that allow audiovisual communication (combining voice with live video), many of which are household names: AIM (AOL Instant Messenger), IM (by Hotmail), Yahoo Messenger, and Skype. Besides the obvious limitation of allowing only two people to communicate at a time, they do not incorporate any other features that might aid in the didactical presentation of material. Understanding these shortcomings, the reader will see why none of the tools mentioned above meet the interactive needs of the online language classroom.

This is where the technological solutions start to get exciting. Few instructors are aware of CCC Confer, a powerful communication tool available to all instructors gratis, thanks to a grant that was funded by the California Community Colleges office. This web-based program gives instructors the tools to conduct a class in real-time, presenting information using VoIP and web-based chat, alongside the content, be that in the form of a slide show, streaming audio and/or video, or simply using a white board. Teachers can talk to students, and students can talk to each other. It is a perfect tool for instructors wishing to conduct online office hours. Again, this program is free and requires no special software. The only disadvantage of CCC Confer is that it does not allow students to see each other when communicating. This may sound insignificant, but in reality it is one of the most important elements of communicating in a foreign language.

As we discussed earlier, learning a foreign language requires face-to-face communication, and language students simply do not have the language skills to read and write in that target language. Students need to both see and hear their instructor and classmates. This type of meaningful communication can be replicated online, but only if both the audio and visual elements are present.

Enter Horizon Wimba and Elluminate. Both of these products allow instructors to present content over the internet and interact with participants in real-time. Students see a live video feed of their instructor, and when acknowledged by the professor, s/he comes on the screen. Breakout rooms are available so that students can see and hear their partners as they conduct face-to-face activities. These programs are web-based and require no special software on the student side, in fact, they seem to fulfill all the requirements. Unfortunately, they are not free.

Obstacles and limitations of technology

Early on in my research I became aware of the challenges we face as we consider offering Spanish (or any other foreign language) online. The main obstacle has to do with the technological divide. It is not so much that current technology does not allow for real-time, face-to-face interactions between teacher and students, it is just that these technologies are not readily available to our students at reasonable prices. To be successful, our students will need easy access to a computer with sufficient memory and speed to power the technology. They will also need a webcam, speaker and headphones to communicate with their instructor and classmates, as well as a fast internet connection (either cable or DSL) so that this communication is not interrupted. (Though this may sound like a luxury, it is essential to streaming video.)

Besides the minimum requirements outlined above, our students and teachers will need the training and support to use this equipment and technology, and as an institution, we must be ready to provide a place on campus where they can access this technology and receive necessary training and trouble shooting. My suggestion is to set up specially equipped cubicles, perhaps even a special wing, in a computer lab that is designed for two-way audio/visual communication.

Although some of our students already possess and are comfortable with this technology, there is a large majority that is not. To quote a colleague and linguist from San Diego Mesa College, Francisco Zabaleta, "Given current conditions, only a technological elite could benefit from such teaching methods. Teaching a small elite is hardly the mandate or the mission of a public community college." Dr. Zabaleta goes on to say that we must not choose this method of instruction, simply because it translates into more FTEs and brings in needed funds. Rather, such important decisions should be based on responsible pedagogy.

The real question that must be on the minds of the reader is this: Can we overcome the obstacles presented above and still provide responsible online language instruction at this time? It is the opinion of the author that current technology is available that can provide a fairly good replica of the face-to-face classroom environment, and that a successful online program is possible. To do this will require a commitment by the District to provide the necessary technology (hardware and software), training and support for faculty and student workstations on campus. This could conceivably happen as early as Spring 2009, when I hope that we will be ready to offer our first fully online Spanish course.

Accomplishments:

As a direct result of this project, I will be teaching a Hybrid Spanish course this Spring 2008, the first of its kind in our District. I believe that teaching a class in this blended format will give us more insight into what we can expect from a fully online course. It will give students all the advantages of an online class, without sacrificing the face-to-face component that is so crucial.

Also as a direct result of this sabbatical, I have been asked to present at San Diego Mesa College's annual Technology in Language Learning Conference that will take place this Spring. I will also be presenting at the Digital Stream Conference on Emerging Technologies in Teaching Language and Culture to be held in Monterey this March.

My sabbatical also gave me the opportunity to produce an Online Resource for students and instructors. These pages are linked to our Department website and can be viewed by visiting: <http://www.cuyamaca.edu/fl/Resources.asp>.

This sabbatical opened up many doors that will require future investigation. The following are areas that will be of interest to many instructors in the future.

- Podcasts
- Blogs: <http://www.commoncraft.com/blogs>
- Wikis: <http://www.commoncraft.com/video-wikis-plain-english>
- RSS Feeds: http://www.commoncraft.com/rss_plain_english

Conclusion:

In order to have a successful online language program, we will need to find a way for students to communicate face-to-face with their instructor and with classmates. Though this technology is available, it is far from ubiquitous, and it will take time before our students have the possession of and experience with these technologies.

In San Diego there are already a couple of community colleges teaching Spanish online as of the writing of this brief. Others are planning to add online or blended courses as early as Fall 2008. Since there seems to be sufficient evidence that teaching Spanish in a blended format makes pedagogical sense, I will be offering our first Spanish 120 Hybrid course in the Spring 2008 semester. I recommend we extend our Hybrid offerings to include Spanish 121 and Spanish 220 by Spring 2009 and consider offering specialized courses (Spanish for Native Speakers, Spanish for Emergency Medical Personnel, Spanish for Law Enforcement, etc.) in subsequent semesters.

As a Department, we are committed to experimenting with different courses, time frames and formats to meet the needs of our students. It is my opinion that we are not prepared at this moment to offer a fully online Spanish course because of the limitations I have outlined earlier. I do believe, however, that languages can be taught responsibly given the right tools and training. I will work to see that we have the necessary technology, hardware, software and support in place so that we could potentially teach our first fully online language course as early as Spring or Fall 2009.

Final Note:

A special thanks to the Governing Board of the Grossmont Cuyamaca College District for allowing me this opportunity to grow professionally. It gave me the opportunity to conduct hundreds of hours of research and learn many new technologies. It also renewed my conviction that we must, as educators, continue to prepare for the next generation of language learners, many of whom come to us with a whole new series of needs, challenges and expectations. Perhaps most importantly, this sabbatical gave me the chance to analyze my own teaching style and, hopefully, improve the way I teach.