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
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