Chapter 8
Transforming a Beginner’s Foreign Language Course Into an Internationalized Course: Language Exchange Pal Project

Rong Liu
Georgia Gwinnett College, USA

ABSTRACT

To internationalize the campus, a Language Exchange Pal Project was developed to enhance students’ cross-cultural experiences in a beginner’s Chinese foreign language course. The Language Exchange Pal Project, using Skype or QQ (similar to Skype), is a great tool to increase students’ global perspective by working in communities of practice with individuals in China who are learning English as a foreign language. Through the technology, students enjoy the opportunity to use the target language in an authentic communicative context and collaborate with their international partners. These two groups collaborate about their language and culture through messages and/or live connections via Skype, chat, or other software systems such as QQ. This chapter shares the process of transforming Chinese 1001 into an i-course, present the Language Exchange Pal Project, describe its challenges, and discuss the preliminary results of the research findings of the Language Exchange Pal Project based on students’ survey and interview.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the call to internationalize the campus and to rethink the curricula to meet the changing needs of students in the new century, a Language Exchange Pal Project was developed to enhance students’ cross-cultural experiences in a beginner’s Chinese foreign language course. Three key objectives of this i-course are for students to be able to describe and evaluate their own cultures, describe and evaluate the target cultures, and communicate with persons of different cultures. The Language Exchange Pal Project, using Skype or QQ, a social networking tool similar to Skype, is a great program to increase students’
global perspective by working in communities of practice with individuals in China who are learning English as a Foreign Language. Through the technology, students enjoy an opportunity to use the target language in an authentic communicative context and collaborate with their international partners who teach each other their language and culture through messages or live connections via Skype, chat, or other software systems such as QQ.

This chapter will share the process of transforming Chinese 1001 into an internationalized course, i.e., an i-course, present the Language Exchange Pal Project, describe its challenges, and discuss the initial results of the research findings of the Language Exchange Pal Project based on students’ survey and one student’s interview. The data collection is very limited and ongoing. However, based on past research (Darhower, 2007; O’Dowd, 2006; Ware & Kramsch, 2005), the project has great potential on helping students achieve communicative and cultural competence in the target language.

Background

Educators and policy makers increasingly acknowledge the value of global competence and intercultural understanding. The National Education Association (NEA) declared in 2010 that “Global competence is a 21st century imperative” (NEA, 2010). Other educators and organizations caution that global competence “is not a luxury, but a necessity” (National Geographic-Roper, 2002; The Asia Society, 2008). The National Intelligence Council (2008) in its report Global Trends, 2025: A transformed World asserts that global challenges will constitute most if not all of the incoming challenges humankind will face. Indeed, the U.S Census Bureau reported that 20% percent of the jobs is tied to international trade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Despite the importance of global competence, the American Council on Education (ACE), in its most recent assessment report of internationalization on US campuses, states that “This optimism about the progress of internationalization is not always grounded in reality (ACE, 2012). The 2012 data show solid gains in some areas, but stagnation or even declines in others, and that progress varies widely by institutional sector.” One of the dramatic declines is the percentage of colleges with an undergraduate foreign language requirement for graduation: it has dropped from 53% in 2001 to only 37% in 2012. This contrasts rather sharply with the research findings in the second and foreign language field that the study of a second language enhances global competence and also cultivates cognitive development, critical thinking, and creativity (Cooper, 1987; Olsen and Brown, 1992; Saville-Troike, 1984). In 2007, the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) issued its report “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World”, which made recommendations to transform foreign language curriculum, including course redesign around cultural rather than exclusively literary-historical (MLA Ad hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). Since the publication of the report, many projects have conducted to transform the curriculum with different approaches ranging from integrating a foreign language and content (i.e., the Languages Across the Curriculum movement) to study abroad programs (Gehlhar, 2009; Klee, 2009). However, no formal report is found regarding internationalizing a beginner’s foreign language course. When discussing foreign languages’ role in internationalization, it is clear that foreign language departments do not play a major role in internationalization efforts and are often not invited at the internationalization meetings (Swaffar & Urlaub, 2014). The current chapter is going to fill a gap in the research by documenting one example of transforming a beginner’s Chinese foreign language course into an internationalized course.