Chapter 10

Developing and Implementing an Online Chinese Program: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The virtual language classroom is becoming more commonplace, and for many instructors it is even a requirement. This chapter aims to present a virtual language classroom case study and to propose a prototype for instructors to develop and implement fully online entry-level language classes, as well as to provide guidelines and recommendations for their reference as they redesign traditional face-to-face language courses to fit the online modality. As the case study progressed, the authors discovered that this new modality of online language instruction poses many challenges. Their research aims to answer questions, such as: 1) is the online instruction in the case study comparable to the face-to-face class? and 2) how can one best balance synchronous and asynchronous components in an entry-level online language (Chinese in specific) course?

INTRODUCTION

The 2010 Sloan Consortium reports (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 2) that as of fall 2009, 5.6 million students, almost 30% of those enrolled in higher education in the U.S., were taking an online course. The consensus among 65.5% of more than 2,500 colleges and universities that participated in a survey is that online learning is, “a critical part of their institution’s long term strategy” (Allen & Seaman, 2011, p. 8). Abundant materials and numerous courses have been created in the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). According to Blake (2011), comparative
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studies which assess the effectiveness of online language learning versus face-to-face instruction remain sparse.

This chapter aims to present the development and implementation of a fully online language course that was effective, efficient, and comparable to the face-to-face version. The case study, set within a Midwestern University in the U.S., involves a fully online entry-level Chinese course juxtaposed with three concurrent face-to-face sessions, all offered to non-language majors. First, five primary topics will be discussed: online curriculum re-design, material development, online course management, online assessment and online learning community. Next, the old and new technologies that were adopted in the online course will be detailed, as well as challenges that were faced, and strategies that were adopted to improve the online system of delivery. In addition, we will present qualitative data on student perceptions of learning online versus face-to-face and quantitative data on students’ use of social networking in their learning process. Based on these findings, we will set forth a prototype for online language instruction with supporting pedagogical considerations. Finally, we will conclude with our recommendations for institutional administrations and second or foreign language teachers who are considering re-designing their traditional language courses, given the constellation of recent and imminent developments in online language learning and teaching.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Although many instructors employ technology in their courses, instructors who deliver content solely online still represent a small percentage (Lancashire, 2009). In the field of online language learning, empirical research has been conducted (Bertin, Cravé, & Narcy-Combes, 2010). However, a small number of comparative studies exist (Blake, 2011). Among those few studies, results are encouraging. For example, in a study on oral proficiency measured by a 20-minute test delivered by phone in distance, face-to-face, and blended Spanish classrooms, the results show that learners achieve comparable levels of oral proficiency during their first year of study (Blake, et al., 2008). In a report published by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009, researchers found that post-secondary students took all or part of their classes online outperformed their counterparts in traditional face-to-face classroom. Furthermore, students learning in blended/hybrid environments performed better than those in fully online courses.

There is no systematic information about the distribution of online credit courses in the United States. To our knowledge, programs such as an advanced Chinese course offered by the University of Hawaii and a beginning Chinese course offered by Coastline Community College in California are few and far between.

The authors are familiar with prior efforts taken to develop and implement courses via distance learning technology in the State of Wisconsin in the U.S. The University of Wisconsin System Collaborative Language Program (CLP) was established in 1998 to provide language instruction to university campuses that did not have resources to offer instruction in some critical languages, primarily Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. CLP adopts a blended model of learning that combines classroom-based Interactive Two-Way Videoconferencing (ITV) and a variety of other Internet-based technologies in order to offer synchronous as well asynchronous language instruction.

The Language Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison offers a hybrid Chinese language course for high school students that combines online and face-to-face instruction. In addition, it has developed a fully online Chinese language course titled Elementary Conversational Chinese for Business Professionals. However, there are no formal research or reports on those