

Promising Efforts, and Hoping for More: A Review of Best Practices from 20 Online Language Programs

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Abstract

This paper discusses "best practices" in online language learning programs according to a variety of evaluative angles. The discussion is based on a review of over 20 online language programs, including both commercial- and education-oriented offerings, and gives a brief explanation of the criteria used and an eminent example for the following areas: Interactive modules; Tools for getting into rich texts; Engaging target-language communities; and Written and Oral Assessments. The hope is not to nominate an overall best program, but rather to examine which elements from a range of programs are exceptionally strong, or suggest where the market might hold particular promise. By providing ready examples of promising efforts, I hope to give a grounded sense for what is (and is not yet) happening in this market.

In order to understand where our efforts could be redundant or innovative, we can look to current efforts by providers of programs, courses, or resources. What we find are some very promising efforts to capitalize on technological and networking capabilities and pedagogical progress in language learning. We also find areas where course, or resource developers can carve out niches, expand on current offerings, or provide resources that aren't widely available yet. Though my research covered several other aspects, I'll focus on four topics of the inquiry: Interactive Modules, Written and Oral Assessments, Tools for getting into Rich Texts and Engaging target-language communities. I'll discuss three aspects on each of these: 1. What the best activities seem to aim at, 2. What the status quo looks like, and 3. What initial opportunity is evident given the gap between the ideal and the status quo. I'll begin with Interactive Modules.

This work is based on research for K12, Inc. (<http://www.k12.com>) a provider of online charter schools principally in the U.S. Since we are headquartered in the U.S., our orientation currently is toward the U.S. market. This means that for some angles, we focus on the U.S. National Standards (the 5 Cs) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines more than, e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Interactive Modules:

Aim: Interactive modules should be specifically relevant to language learning. The best modules also focus on sentences or more, not words.

Field Status Quo: Activities like Drag and Drop, Matching (audio, image, translation) are prevalent in many course offerings. Several programs have sophisticated interactive modules tailored specifically to language learning.

Opportunity: More activities where students string together numerous sentences; more modules that incorporate rich comprehensible texts as opposed to translations, or only simple texts.

In the Powerspeak12-Gale activity, students enter word breaks into phrases with words strung together with no spaces. This is an example of an interaction that is specifically tied to language.

Rosetta Stone (RS) has some of the most visually appealing interactive modules that focus on listening, reading, speaking, and writing. A central component to RS is their large library of images. The drawback with RS materials is that they only very rarely present more than a sentence at a time. In one of their strongest exercises, students read and listen to a short exchange, then speak a portion of a separate exchange, but that they should be able to easily figure out from the images in comparison to the previous exchange: e.g. "They are looking for a place to study."... "They found a place to study." Then the student must provide a similarly matching phrase to: "They found a place to exercise."

Few interactive modules incorporate rich text into the fiber of the module. An exception from Aventa challenges students to complete a paragraph by dragging the appropriate terms to spaces: A tweak on the conventional Drag and Drop exercise, again, from Aventa, involves richer descriptions, and students match them with images. We could also do the same but have audio descriptions in the place of the written descriptions.

In an example from Dyned, students have this prompt: How long is the interview scheduled to last? And they drag the appropriate terms to make a complete and contextually suitable response.

Written & Oral Assessments:

Aim: Students should have enough, but not too much structure, and the opportunity to string together a sentence, or several sentences. They should have enough modeling prior to the assessment so that they are likely to be able to succeed. The modeling should be similar to, but not identical to the assessment challenge. Assessments should challenge students to progress along ACTFL's written and spoken proficiency guidelines. Should also have opportunities to speak and write in open-ended ways and get meaningful feedback.

Field Status Quo: Wide range of prompts for written and oral assessments, but striking right balance between too much and too little structure is evidently difficult. Often assessments are in response to a prompt, and students are guided to respond in at least a certain number of sentences.

Opportunity: Align written assessments closely with ACTFL written and spoken proficiency guidelines.

In Hello-Hello, Members write a dialogue similar to the dialogue they have been reviewing—but personalized. Then submit to their Hello-Hello network friends for feedback. Members should not just be re-writing a memorized dialogue, but can slightly expand on the exact text they have been learning to make it their own.

For writing assessment, the key exercise in Live Mocha is a simple prompt that could resemble real-life conversational exchanges, such as: Describe your favorite meal. Describe your last vacation, etc. Members type their response: The tools for the text of written feedback are also impressive. Reviewers can make color changes, highlight, make bold, italicize, underline, strikethrough, or paste from Word. When you review written submissions, you rate on spelling, quality, and grammar (plus whatever written or audio feedback you want to provide).

In the Aventa platform, students write a summary of a favorite movie or story. Leading up to this, students have seen how this was done for another movie, Snow White, and they have completed other relevant assignments. I would want more guidance, or warning early on, or some practice doing this on a smaller scale, but this is pretty good for the assessment matching the instruction.



Dyned includes an activity where students string together sentences from basic building blocks. Students have limited building blocks, and they have encountered sample sentences leading up to this. From just these few building blocks, students can practice stringing together numerous sentences. If interaction was drag and drop to make sentences this would also be an ideal type of interactive module.

In Live Mocha's Role Play, members select which of two characters to play in a conversation. (They can pick either, or alternate). Members read a line, then hear a prompt/response from the interlocutor. When each character speaks, his or her image is displayed. At the end, they can listen to the entire dialogue with their voice as if interacting with the native speaker.

Tools for getting into rich texts:

Aim: Learners should be provided with resources for making sense of level-appropriate, involved, authentic texts.

Field Status Quo: A few programs have sophisticated tools to help students get into involved, authentic texts.

Opportunity: Develop materials, or direct students to sources for authentic texts, and tools. Train teachers on locating interesting, authentic texts that students can comprehend.

In the LingQ platform, Students read through, and listen to involved, authentic, crowd-sourced and professional texts. Words are highlighted, unless learners have indicated that they "know" the word. On mouse-over, students can read a translation of the word, and indicate if they know it. Also, if students make a "lingq" to a word, they can view other sentences in the LingQ library of materials that contain the target word—to get a fuller sense of its meaning. A "lingQ" includes a hint (provided by other users), the phrase from which the member selected the term, and several examples of the term or phrase in sentences from other texts in the LingQ library.

In an elegant activity in LangNet, students read current news stories with parallel translations.

Interpersonal Communication:

Statement: Program should provide ample opportunities and resources for students to interact in real time, as well as asynchronously with native speakers, or more proficient speakers and writers of the target language.

Field Status Quo: Except for the language community sites, online programs typically offer minimal interpersonal communication opportunities—only during synchronous sessions, or similar. Language community sites (like Live Mocha, LingQ, Hello-Hello) offer capabilities, but not a structure, or set schedule for interacting regularly.

Opportunity: Provide structure for regular authentic interaction, and build out resources (list of online sites to use, possible conversation topics, speaking proficiency guidelines) for students to get the most out of such structure.

For Asynchronous programs, Qooco has a regular activity called Roleplay Converse: Students listen to prompts from an animated figure, and respond by reading the Pinyin (they can select to read English or Chinese characters as well) provided that they have learned in the focus conversation—this reinforces the link between prompt-response, and they work with sentences, not just words.

Livemocha makes it simple to get in touch with other friends who are online. Indeed, one of the near universal indicators is number of friends online. Here is how it works, you either issue or you receive a



request for a chat. The request includes the member name, languages, and mochapoints. Members can chat in writing or live speaking or video.

PowerspeaK12 courses include an ongoing assignment called: Becoming a Lifelong Learner. This assignment challenges students to set up a regular schedule for engaging the target language and culture in three respects: 1. accessing information intended for native speakers, 2. interacting with native speakers, and 3. participating in target-language speaking cultural events. This over-arching assignment gives concrete applications for what students learn in the other instructional modules, and gives very simple, yet adequate structure for the aim of communicative competence.

References

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