Preparing Students for Online Language Learning

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Abstract

Technology has permeated all aspects of our society making online courses a must for most, if not all, educational programs. Unfortunately, educators have mistakenly assumed that students need no preparation for engaging in the online classroom. On the contrary, engagement in the online classroom requires a vastly different set of technical skills than those required for social media or video gaming. Online instruction is often asynchronous resulting in isolation that often leads to unrealistic expectations on the part of both student and teacher. Therefore, it is imperative that students be taught how to properly use and engage the technology. Additionally, due to the inherently intimate nature of language learning, online language learners face a unique challenge arising from this isolation- quality comprehensible input. Finally, students often enter the language learning process expecting to immediately be able to speak the language. While teachers are used to managing expectations of this nature in the traditional classroom, continually managing and reinforcing such expectations in the online environment is a challenge. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers develop online lessons and tools to help learners understand the concept of proficiency and its measurement. This presentation will discuss development of modules to address these issues and exhibit sample modules that can be used in K12 and post-secondary online programs.

Keywords: *Proficiency, technology, language learning;*

Introduction

Technology use in educational settings is a hot topic around the world. Teachers are always looking for new ways to engage students especially in the online environment. Unfortunately, most educators assume that 21st Century students, having grown up with computers, iphones and internet at their fingertips, already possess the technical skills needed to navigate online courses with little or no help. Likewise, students make assumptions about language learning and often have unrealistic expectations about their proficiency level at the end of one course. Students often believe they should be "fluent" after one course because they do not understand the nature of language learning—especially the need for comprehensible input in order to learn a language. The solution seems obvious—teach our students the technical skills they will need to be successful including the language learning process and the concept of language proficiency levels, and encourage students to set appropriate learning goals for the course. However, this is a much more daunting process in the online environment. This paper will present a brief review of current research and then describe two modules that have helped students better navigate learning a language online in beginning online courses.

1. Research

In 2001, Marc Prensky coined the term "digital native."[1]He defined digital natives as those born after 1980 who have never known a world without computers, the internet or cellphones. Those born before 1980 did not grow up with all of the modern computer technology he called digital immigrants. He asserts there is a natural, generational divide between digital natives and digital immigrants which has led to many erroneous assumptions about today's students and their technological skills. In her article, O'Neal states "It is problematic that there are so many assumptions about how just because a [person grew up with digital media…they are automatically tech savy." In fact the amount of empirical evidence suggesting the contrary is growing. [2] One study on college students' technology use found that they did not know how to properly use email nor did they know how to use Google to find needed information. [3]. Danah Boyd interviewed 150 adolescents about technology and found that just because young people spend a lot of time on the internet or using social media does not mean they have any real idea of how best to use these tools. She asserts that the idea of "digital natives" is

dangerous because it implies a skill level that students do not actually have and prevents them from being taught how to properly use technology. [4]

In the 1980's and 90's, research on student beliefs and expectations in foreign languages classes was prevalent, but did not specifically look at student expectations of learning a language or explore expectations of proficiency. With the advent of proficiency-oriented instruction, teachers have begun to use proficiency level terminology with students, and it has become clear that students needed to be taught both the process of language learning and the various proficiency levels. While there are no empirical studies yet support the claim that teaching students about proficiency and language learning, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is key in tempering student expectations and motivating them to succeed in their language classes.

2. Teaching Technology Skills

As the research above shows, students need to be taught the technical skills they need in an online class to be successful. The first step is determining which technologies will best suit the needs of the learner in the class. In the author's experience, it is better to teach students about all the technology required and then practice it in their native language before attempting to use it in the target language. In prior online courses before developing the technology module, students often complained about learning new technology throughout the semester. But having them learn and practice in the native language first seems to have reduced their cognitive load, their anxiety, and allowed for community building within the online environment. This community development (getting to know each other and foster friendships within the class) helps lower the affective filter and produces a more conducive learning environment.

When creating a technology module there are several considerations: First, the number of different programs, websites, etc. (eg. during the first semester of the author's program, students complained about the quantity of technology used that required a separate login information). Thus, the teacher needs to carefully evaluate the ease of use, as well as, the purpose served of each piece of technology.

Second, the learning management system needs to be considered. In many schools and universities, the learning management system (LMS) is decided by administrators. No matter which LMS is used, teachers need to consider what tasks/assignments can be performed within the LMS, tasks that fully integrate with the LMS, and which tasks/tools are completely outside of the LMS. The fewer outside tools used, the easier it will be for students to successfully navigate the course. Once all tools have been chosen, video tutorials on the use of the tools must be created or found. Often, there are existing video tutorials already from the developer, but they still must be incorporated into a task that students complete to demonstrate their mastery of that tech tool.

Many of these initial tech-learning tasks can build on one another. For example, students can make a post to a discussion board within the LMS, or be required to comment on classmates' posts. In addition to learning how to post and comment, students use the process to get to know each other and select conversation partners for the course. Incorporating the selection component causes students to read the posts with a different eye and they often read more than the 2 required posts. After selecting a conversation partner, they are required to have "get to know you" conversations in their native language using an online conferencing tool that must be recorded on video. Conversation starter questions are provided, but the students are not required to use them--the only requirement is a 5-7 minute conversation. The student response to these assignments has been quite positive. Students report liking to have a purpose for the discussion post (finding a partner) and getting to interact in the native language first reduces their anxiety about later speaking with them in the target language. Additionally, students are given the opportunity to practice with the video conferencing tool. This is especially important because several students have recorded audio only or video with no sound not realizing. They can redo the assignment to figure out how to use the tool correctly before they complete tasks in the target language.

2.1 Teaching Language Learning Strategies

Most students enter foreign language classrooms with a wealth of school experience. They assume that the skills acquired in other classes will help them be successful in their language class. However, the 21st century language class is quite different from any other because the subject of the class is also the medium of instruction. In other words, students are learning French through the teacher speaking French. It can be disconcerting for students who expect the focus to be verbs charts and flashcards. Today's students want to understand the reasons for what they are being asked to do; thus, the need to be taught the focus of the course is communication and that grammar and vocabulary are only tools to help them communicate, but that actually using the target language as much as possible is essential for language learning.

Often students also have unrealistic expectations for proficiency development. Most students feel that they should be "fluent" at the end of one semester of study and become disappointed when they can only answer yes/no questions, make lists, and use memorized chunks of language. This disappointment often leads students to believe that language learning is "too hard" and "they can't learn it." Their expectations for proficiency are set too high due to a lack of understanding of proficiency and its development. Educating students about proficiency and setting realistic expectations is crucial to student success in the course, and getting students to continue their study of the language.

Another crucial element to student success is teaching them strategies for how to learn a language. Students must be equipped with language learning strategies that can be used not only in class but in their daily lives. Teaching students how to learn a language is just as important as teaching the language itself. Learning a language is a unique experience and traditional classroom strategies used in other courses will not always lend the same success in the online environment. For example, in order to teach all of the necessary content, the author created three videos on proficiency, communication and language learning strategies. The videos are interactive meaning students must answer questions to move on to the next segment of the video. In addition, students have other tasks to complete. To demonstrate their understanding of proficiency, they must post a description of their favorite Friday night activity in their native language and on the proficiency level the student chooses. For example, if a student chooses a novice low level, (according to the ACTFL guidelines) they will post something like "fun. Football game, win, hot dogs" to describe their favorite event. The other students will read the posts, decide the proficiency level and post their answer. One week later, the students go in to check and see if they were correct. They also complete a goal setting activity in which they choose the proficiency level they would like to reach at the end of the course and at least two language learning strategies they will use. Throughout the semester (every 4-5 weeks), students are asked to re-evaluate their goals and make adjustments if needed thus keeping these ideas front and center throughout the course and helping students take responsibility for their own learning.

Conclusion

It may seem a rather daunting task to incorporate all of this content into an already full foreign language course. Yet, when incorporated, the author's experience has been that students are more engaged and more successful in their language learning and more likely to continue taking language courses.

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