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Sustaining Choice in Language Instruction

Alternative Instructional Systems

Humanities disciplines attract only modest enrollments and are threatened by reallocation of funding. Less-commonly taught languages are particularly vulnerable. They can be sustained by cost-effective alternatives to the orthodox classroom instructional format. The article describes self-accessed learning and various multimedia distance-learning options, and assesses their effectiveness.

Senator Paul Simon, in *The Tongue-Tied American*, and Richard Lambert, in *Beyond Growth*, eloquently stated the need for increasing the availability of basic-skills programs in non-Western languages. Yet the general problem of enrollments and funding is most critical in virtually the entire field of foreign language education: Universities are confronted with the dilemma of providing the opportunity to study languages for which demand is minimal at a time when competing claims on resources preclude elaborate outlays for such programs. For hundreds of universities, the availability of standard, classroom-formatted instructional programs in Third World and other less-commonly taught languages is not easily achieved in an era of austerity. A highly cost-effective instructional format is the only means by which Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Swahili, etc., can be offered on a regular basis to very small student constituencies, even when enrollments are substantially below the minimum required to justify hiring qualified instructors at low cost on a part-time basis.

There are nontraditional instructional approaches that have been developed precisely because (a) the need exists, (b) resources are severely limited, and (c) budgetarily viable alternatives are available. The delivery options that are described here are often interconnected and can be combined and modified in accordance with an institution's particular requirements.

Foreign language curricula provide an illustrative context, but the descriptions that follow are generally useful for the enhancement of other "endangered species" in the curriculum.

Self-Instruction

The self-instructional language curriculum (sometimes termed "self-accessed" or "auto-didactic") represents an alternative form of instruction designed for institutions lacking the enrollments, and the corresponding financial resources, to provide a more orthodox form of instructor-based, classroom-centered learning. In the early 1970s, the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs (NASILP) was established for the purpose of fostering learner-centered academic programs across a wide range of low-enrollment, less-commonly taught languages (now numbering more than fifty).

The NASILP format, currently in use at over one hundred colleges and universities in the United States, is not unduly complex—but there are several special characteristics which merit attention.

- The coordinator of a self-instructional curriculum in the NASILP format is almost invariably *not* trained in any of the languages offered. Some coordinators are directors of university language laboratories or multidisciplinary area studies centers. More important than discipline or department is the coordinator's keen awareness of the characteristics of self-accessed language skills acquisition, especially as they differ from the classroom instructional format. NASILP has developed guidelines that define the parameters of program administration. The self-instructional language curriculum is successful only when the coordinator understands its special requirements and limitations. Accordingly, institutional affiliation with NASILP for guidance and assistance in all areas of program design and operation is a virtual necessity.

- Since language self-instruction is text-specific, the selection of audio-intensive (often multimedia) materials for student use is of critical importance. Text-and-tape packages (audio and/or video) must be appropriate for this instructional methodology. Many materials developed by commercial publishers for use in a classroom setting are inappropriate for self-instructional programs. However, for many foreign languages there are audio/video/print (and some computer-assisted) materials that can support four to six semesters of self-accessed undergraduate work.

- Even though the student, working independently for ten or more hours per week, relies on the aforementioned audio-oriented text and audio-visual cassettes, these are not the only instructional tools. While this method places central importance on the individual learner rather than the classroom instructor, the student must be provided access to a native speaker of the target language in small-group drill and tutorial sessions at least twice weekly. The native tutor is not a professionally trained instructor and is

not employed in that capacity. The tutor is an educated native speaker of the preferred dialect of the language in question and provides the learner with regular oral/aural interaction in the target language. The textual materials, not the tutor, provide the necessary explanation of structure and idiom. Accordingly, the tutor in a self-study course does not *teach* in any sense other than by providing a focused model of native speech targeted to the requirements of the text-based syllabus.

■ Although the tutorial sessions provide structure, the sections are scheduled with times to be arranged, and registrants provide the coordinator with their roster schedules on (or just prior to) the beginning of the term. Since only four or five students and one tutor constitute a tutorial/drill group, it is usually possible to design a mutually acceptable tutorial schedule for all participants. Once established, the tutorial schedule becomes a stable part of the students' schedule. This flexibility is of special benefit to metropolitan university students with dissimilar work, class, and commuting schedules.

■ The key to quality control in any self-instructional program is the examiner, a professor of the language in question at a university that offers that language in a standard academic program. The *external examiner* typically visits the self-instructional course(s) for the testing of students and an evaluation of all components of the program. Indeed, the examiner can be a very useful resource person for the coordinator, tailoring specific recommendations to special needs and circumstances. When requested, NASILP examiners are able to provide comprehensive evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of the targeted language curriculum for the department chair, dean, or provost. The question naturally arises: What degree of success do veteran NASILP examiners discover in the self-instructional language centers for which they provide testing services? Not surprisingly, the quality of such programs varies widely, almost invariably in direct relation to the conscientiousness with which the coordinator has adhered to the guidelines set forth in NASILP publications. If proper procedures are followed, the integrity of such programs can be assured through periodic external validation.

The foregoing is not an exhaustive discussion of the instructional methodologies and pedagogical techniques that form the foundation for language self-instruction, nor have we touched on those crucial budgetary aspects of this learning alternative that underscore its utility for serving very small enrollments. More detailed information on individualized self-accessed foreign language instruction may be obtained from the NASILP Secretariat, Critical Languages Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122.

Distance Learning

It is somewhat curious that distance learning is perceived as a relatively recent development in American universities. Correspondence courses have been with us for well over a century, the University of Chicago having established a home-study division in 1892. Early in this century, the National University Extension Division was established, complete with a correspondence study division. In the 1990s, electronically directed or assisted distance learning, using specially designed text materials and incorporating quality control, provides viable learning alternatives undreamed of even a few decades ago. There is, however, one supremely important caveat: All forms of distance learning, from the simple correspondence course to satellite tele/video-conferencing, are based on the assumption that all target student populations share the same instructional goals. Distance learning in any of its forms, akin to the self-instructional methodology already discussed, is not for the dilettante. Students who require externally generated motivation from the instructor or class peers are not likely to flourish in nontraditional settings. However, when mature and self-disciplined learners are highly motivated, course completion rates by means of self-instruction are excellent.

Television is the most common form of distance learning utilized by U.S. universities. With specific regard to foreign language acquisition, North Carolina State University inaugurated the Televised Japanese Language Program for schools in that state in 1984. The arrangement provides long-distance Japanese language instruction through the recycling of videotapes of live classes. The system is supplemented by local coordinators and drill instructors at each participating institution, and may be best defined as television-assisted rather than television-based instruction. At universities that cannot afford a full-time instructor, the North Carolina approach is a cost-effective means of providing instruction to small groups of students at several schools concurrently.

Other forms of distance learning involve the use of telecommunications-based delivery systems. Such *tele-learning* incorporates both credit and noncredit instruction, often through an integration of technologies: audio and video conferencing, cable television, instructional television fixed services (ITFS), satellite transmission, and broadcast television courses integrated with companion texts. There are three major categories of producers of telecourses:

- organizations, such as college consortia, that produce, use, and distribute them, and constitute 33 percent of all producers;
- public television series producers (16 percent); and
- colleges that produce for their own use (51 percent).

Though not commonplace, television-based instruction already is well established at many colleges and universities. The University of Kentucky reported over 2,000 enrollments for its telecourses in 1989, and the University of South Florida at Tampa enrolled almost 3,500 telecourse students in 1990.

Overseas, the Italian national television system (RAI) and the Ital-

ian University for Foreigners of Perugia are developing an introductory Italian telecourse that will include computer and audio materials in addition to the video and print components. In the fall of 1990, one version of the video component was presented in the United States on The Learning Channel, a full-time educational service carried by more than 750 cable companies in the United States and Canada.

According to the Roper Organization, by 1991 almost 80 percent of American households owned videocassette recorders, and over twelve million VCRs were sold in 1989. Because of this proliferation, video-instructional materials are becoming increasingly available for many social science and humanities disciplines. The primary convenience, of course, is that VCR-based instruction is independent of programming or course schedules and can reach outside a city's broadcast area. If broadcast options are unavailable or too costly, the VCR tape may be the only television-based distance learning option. When joined with the native-speaker tutorial-supported format that characterizes language self-instructional programs, video-based materials provide an ideal foundation for student-centered instruction of low-enrollment foreign languages.

Although television and VCR enhancements to classroom-based instruction have been available to some degree for many years, their fullest utilization is likely to be in the development of individualized instructional alternatives that are not instructor-based. This has more to do with faculty attitudes than with technological advances. Several studies during the past twenty years have concluded that instructors shun the use of video because they believe that good teaching is the product of direct student-teacher contact, and that any pedagogy employing video or computer technologies lessens the importance of that interaction.

Further, there are common misconceptions concerning audio-visual and computer-software materials that make faculty curriculum committees anxious about a new curriculum that shifts instruction away from the classroom teacher. Self-instructional and media-based course proposals are often rejected by suspicious faculty who fear any deviation from time-tested instructional orthodoxy. In addition to the diminished role of the instructor in video-based instruction, other myths include the claim that telecourse students learn less than they would in a classroom, and that televised (or VCR-based) instruction is suitable only for "easy" subjects. Other faculty misgivings focus on the pre-established pacing of telecourses, and the allegation that the electronic media dehumanize learning.

Since television/VCR materials and technology should not be added to the instructional mix of a university curriculum in the absence of faculty endorsement, is it possible to encourage faculty receptivity toward any video-based, or any technologically enhanced, course proposal? Although a successful experience at one university may not be fully replicated elsewhere, faculty may be inclined to accept the value of a curricular proposal that already enjoys success at another university. Also, some faculty lack the vision to be in the vanguard, tending instead to follow the lead of peer institutions at which new methods and materials are developed and tested. In some cases, a *needs assessment* that

identifies shifts in student interests will be worth the market research effort.

Since the mid-1980s, student demand for Japanese language instruction has dramatically exceeded any similar shift in foreign language programming in the history of American higher education. Only a very few North American universities offer graduate degree programs in Japanese, and the current demand for doctoral-level faculty in Japanese exceeds the supply by a factor of at least thirty. Consequently, an assortment of nontraditional instructional modes have filled this large gap at many universities. Though video-based (or enhanced) learning is relatively common in an individualized or autodidactic language program, exceeded only by the ubiquitous audiotape, it is worth mentioning that *telephone individualized instruction* currently is available for the study of more than a dozen non-Western European languages (several East European languages, plus Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese).

Telephone-assisted individualized instruction in foreign languages, known as Tele-TAMBSPI (Teacher-Assisted, Mastery-Based, Self-Paced Instruction), has been established at Ohio State University's Department of Slavic and East European Languages. Although a telephone language center staffed by teachers of the various languages is maintained in Columbus, students must arrange for academic credit through their home institutions, which participate in TALICO (Telephone Assisted Language Instruction Consortium).

While the teaching, monitoring, and testing of language skill acquisition by means of long-distance telephone is somewhat controversial, the program's supporters laud its ability to tailor the program's resources to the special requirements of each student. Critics observe that contact with a live teacher is available only through an instrument (the telephone) with a fidelity of sound reproduction that may not provide adequate oral/aural support for the learning of a foreign sound system. It is worth noting that most external examiners for self-instructional language centers avoid the use of long-distance telephone for testing purposes. However, student-teacher consultation by phone, in which English is the language of communication, can provide an interactive component to grammatical analysis. Target language *use*, on the other hand, is better served by the much higher audiofidelity of audio-, video-, and computer-controlled interactive videodisc programs.

Computers

It is becoming apparent that the computer revolution will not redefine the delivery of instruction to the extent its advocates have claimed. The television-based *electronic university*, so widely predicted in the 1950s and 1960s, failed to develop because the existence of a technology does not necessarily create a corresponding revolution in education. However, computers have been adapted for a valuable role through computer-assisted instruction (CAI). Fundamental issues that underlie the implementation of CAI for language study are:

- aspects of second-language acquisition that computer technology can address, assuming that materials are developed on a theoretical linguistic basis;
- the computer's role in the development of generative tutorial systems in accordance with accepted pedagogical linguistic theories; and
- identification of conditions that favor the integration of computer-enhanced curricula into the host university's academic environment.

The Computer Assisted Language Learning and Instruction Consortium, known as CALICO, plays a central role in the development of software programs (including videodisc) for many foreign languages, and is headquartered at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Under optimal conditions, computer-assisted pedagogy accommodates individual learner variables. Ideally, computer programs are self-directed and learner-centered, providing the flexibility and adaptability required for diverse student cadres. To the extent that computer-assisted learning is interactive, learners are provided with control of pacing, depth of study, range of content, and allocation of time. The rationale for autodidactic learning (regardless of the type of technical support) is that students know which strategies are most effective, and will use them appropriately.

While it is assumed that exercising control over one's learning is a valuable educational experience, a measure of scholarly skepticism may be warranted. To the extent that computer programs are self-regulated, students are likely to approach language study as *code breaking* rather than as the development of functional communicative competence for real-world situations. The adult learner's natural tendency to define foreign language study in the context of English-based analysis of grammar and idiom unfortunately matches the design of many software programs developed for elementary-language study. At its worst, the poorly monitored student may transform language study into cryptography. This illustrates that tools or methods that motivate are of little value if they motivate activity that does not advance mastery of the subject.

Software for computer-driven elementary-language learning generally is unavailable for those languages most in need of alternatives to the orthodox classroom. With the exception of interactive videodisc programs requiring a major financial commitment in hardware, most foreign language CAI is of the written drill-and-practice variety, emphasizing recall of facts, with minimal diagnostics. The nature of computer technology best serves the teaching of reading and writing skills, and structural analysis. Advocates of CAI identify four aspects of language study that are well suited to the medium: vocabulary learning, explanation and drill of grammatical concepts, reading comprehension, and development of basic writing skills. The most readily available software programs, commonly developed by textbook publishers, focus learner attention on the written form of the language (via the monitor and keyboard). In contrast, almost all classroom teaching assumes that aural

comprehension is the first and most fundamental skill taught, followed by the development of oral fluency. Since even the most advanced electronics cannot yet comprehend and correct human speech, the foundation of language study must, for the time being at least, continue to involve the human ear of an instructor or tutor.

While this discussion of methods and materials is not encyclopedic, it illustrates the types of options, some not especially high-technology, which can sustain a low-enrollment curriculum during an era of strained resources. However, instructional alternatives must be held to the same fundamental standards and measured by the same metrics as are standard classroom and lecture-hall courses. Neither the practical nor the innovative must be used as the rationale for pedagogical methods in the humanities that betray humanistic objectives. And these also guard against the consequences of the unfortunate notion that anyone can teach language.

If new approaches to the teaching of the humanities are based on solid and verifiable pedagogical principles, no defense is needed. If programs are driven by new technologies or the latest techniques, no defense is possible. In distinguishing form from content, we must acknowledge and assess new instructional delivery systems in light of how students heretofore have most effectively learned the subject matter in question. This is the guidepost that makes us secure in offering low-enrollment humanities courses through new technologies.

Suggested Readings

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