

Reference Desk Response
Foreign Language Instruction: Technologies and Online Tools

Date Request Received: 2/8/2010

Description of Request:

A superintendent is interested in creating a new foreign-language program in a middle school that departs from the district's current traditional, grammar-based, teacher-centered foreign-language approach. The superintendent envisions a classroom environment in which students can have access to other languages and interact with them meaningfully. The community has very few speakers of languages other than English.

Question:

1. What does the research say about the use of foreign-language teaching technology and online tools for stimulating independent (non-classroom based) learning in school-age children?
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Report:

Following an established REL-NEI Reference Desk research protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive and policy-oriented briefs and articles in this area. The sources included federally funded organizations, additional research institutions, several educational research databases, and a general Internet search using Google and other search engines. We also searched for appropriate organizations that may act as resources on this issue. We have not done an evaluation of these organizations or the resources themselves, but offer this list to you for your information only.

REL-NEI researchers found several articles on the use of technology and online tools in foreign language courses to both to school-age children and to other age groups. However, none of our sources directly addressed supporting foreign language learning as an independent (non-classroom based) activity.

In addition to these resources, we have also provided a list of related organizations on foreign language learning with technology.

Question:

1. **What does the research say about the use of the use of foreign-language teaching technology and online tools for stimulating independent (non-classroom based) learning in school-age children?**

1.1. Learning Foreign Languages at a Distance: Characteristics of Effective Online Courses.

Nielson, K, Gonzalez-Looret, M., and Pinckney, K.; 2009; University of Maryland; 20 pages.

(http://www.casl.umd.edu/sites/default/files/Nielson09_LearningForeignLang.pdf)

From the Summary: "Due to the nationwide shortage of foreign language teachers and funding for language-learning materials—especially in critical languages—development of a national system of online (i.e., distance) and hybrid (i.e., blended online and face-to-face) courses is essential to make more courses in more languages available to U.S. students, government, and military

personnel. While distance and hybrid courses offer some advantages to learners and institutions, they also come with challenges that can impede their successful implementation. The University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) reviewed the existing literature on online and hybrid learning as well as foreign language learning and teaching in order to recommend best practices for the development of distance and blended foreign language courses.” The review’s provided three conclusions: online courses are flexible but may have challenges, the face-to-face component of hybrid courses may solve the challenges of online courses, and careful course design and instructor training are the keys to an effective online or hybrid language-learning program.

1.2. Second Language Acquisition and Technology: A Review of the Research. *Leloup, J.W. and Ponterio, R.; December 2003; Digest EDO-FL-03-11; two pages.*
(http://www.cal.org/resources/Digest/digest_pdfs/0311leloup.pdf)

The authors review the current research base, first in terms of limitations, then discussing several aspects of learning via technology: sociocultural issues, learner affect, language awareness, nature of language production, and language skills. “More important than the use of technology per se is the quality of what is done with this medium. A badly conceived interactive task or activity is poor whether it is done on a computer or face to face. Using technology is not enough. In order to promote successful learning, tasks must be meaningful, have a true interactional component, and have a comprehensible purpose for the language student.” (p. 2)

1.3. Invited Commentary: New Tools for Teaching Writing. *Warschauer, M.; February 2010; Language Learning & Technology, volume 14, number 1, pp. 3–8 University of California, Irvine pp. 3-8.*
(<http://llt.msu.edu/vol14num1/vol14num1.pdf>)

Although the author states on page 1: “Most of what I write about will focus on English language learners, as that is the target of my most recent research;” he continues on to say “some of it may be applicable to teaching other languages as well.”

From the abstract: “The diffusion of new technologies, and the development of the knowledge economy that these technologies have contributed to, have made the teaching and learning of writing more important than ever before. Fortunately, these same new technologies can also aid the teaching of second language writing. Blogs, wikis, automated essay scoring, and open-source netbooks are four important tools that can assist writing instruction. As with other educational tools, none of these will bring positive results merely from their presence. However, thoughtful use of these tools can enhance effective instructional approaches that emphasize writing for meaningful social purposes, mastery of relevant genres, and development of students’ academic language proficiency.” (p. 8)

1.4. Distance Learning in Foreign Languages. *n.d.; The National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL)*

(<http://www.ncssfl.org/papers/index.php?distancelearning>)

This NCSSFL Position Statement states: “The National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) recognizes the rapid growth and contributions of foreign language distance learning programs. This position statement addresses the unique potential of distance learning that relies on the use of telecommunications as the primary technology for foreign language instruction. At the same time, the statement addresses the demands which distance learning places on students, teachers and on school districts. In this paper, distance learning refers to classroom situations in which the teacher and the students are in different classrooms....” The following sections in the position statement might be helpful to the requestor: proficiency emphasis in distance learning foreign language classes, qualifications of the distance learning teachers and on-site facilitators, and appropriate use of technology.

1.5. Motivating Students' Foreign Language and Culture Acquisition Through Web-Based Inquiry. *Altstaedter, L.L. and Jones, B.; 2009; American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.*

Abstract only: Full-text available for purchase from Wiley InterScience Foreign Language Annals:
(<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/122687828/abstract>)

From the abstract: “According to the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, one of the ultimate goals of studying a foreign language is to better understand different cultures. To this end, we implemented a project in an undergraduate foreign language course that

promoted a systematic inquiry-based approach to learning about the Hispanic culture. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether this project would increase students' ability perceptions and values related to the Spanish language and the Hispanic culture. Data from questionnaires and reflection essays demonstrated that students reported higher ability perceptions and values in the Spanish language and the Hispanic culture as a direct result of participating in the project. These findings suggest that this inquiry-based teaching approach is a viable way to incorporate the study of culture into a university foreign language course."

1.6. Computer-Assisted Language Learning Trends and Issues Revisited: Integrating Innovation. *Garrett, N.; 2009; Modern Language Journal, Vol. 93, No. 1; pp. 719-740; ERIC # EJ865417.*

Abstract only: Full-text available for purchase from Modern Language Journal:

(<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/123204637/issue>)

From the abstract: "This update to Garrett (1991), "Technology in the Service of Language Learning: Trends and Issues," explores current uses of technology to facilitate the teaching and assessment of second languages. In this article, I discuss the changes that have taken place over the last 18 years regarding selected topics from the 1991 article, including the relationship between pedagogy, theory, and technology, physical infrastructure, efficacy, copyright concerns, categories of software (e.g., tutorial, authentic materials engagement, communication uses of technology), and evaluation. I then explore the most challenging issues facing computer-assisted language learning (CALL) scholarship and practice today, that is, new demands in language education (based on the conclusions of the 2007 report of the Modern Language Association and Jackson & Malone, 2009), the need to rethink grammar instruction, online learning, social computing, teacher training and professional development, and CALL research. Like the original 1991 article, this work contains an appendix with links to information resources for CALL research and practice."

Additional Organizations and Resources to Consult

- **Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)**

(<http://www.cal.org>)

From the "About CAL" page (<http://www.cal.org/about/index.html>): "The Center for Applied Linguistics is dedicated to providing a comprehensive range of research-based information, tools, and resources related to language and culture." Areas on the site include Research, CAL Resources, and resources on particular subtopics around second language acquisition.

- **Ñandutí:** Under the CAL Topics link "Foreign Language," and then the sub-link "PreK-12," are links to resources on language proficiency assessment and to Ñandutí, a website on foreign language teaching and learning in Grades preK-8. Under the "Teaching Resources" section of Ñandutí is a "Strategies & Methodology" section containing links to resources on topics including videos of exemplary teaching and "Technology in the Classroom." This "Technology in the Classroom" section includes links to CAL topic Digests and the journal *Language Learning and Technology*, the organization Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium, and websites on other aspects of integrating technology. <http://www.cal.org/earlylang/teaching/technology.html>
- Under the link <http://www.cal.org/twi/>, CAL provides information on an alternative model to the "traditional, grammar-based, teacher-centered foreign language approach" in its Two-Way Immersion resources section.

- **CALICO Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium**

(<https://calico.org>)

From "About Us" page: CALICO is a "professional organization that serves a membership involved in both education and technology. CALICO has an emphasis on language teaching and learning but reaches out to all areas that employ the languages of the world to instruct and to learn. CALICO is a recognized international clearinghouse and leader in computer assisted learning and instruction. It is a premier global association dedicated to computer-assisted language learning (CALL)." (<https://calico.org/page.php?id=240>)

Key words and search strings used in the search:

Middle school OR junior high school OR secondary school AND foreign language OR second language AND technology OR online OR computer-assisted NOT ESL

Search databases and websites:

Institute for Education Science Sites: Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL); What Works Clearinghouse (WWC); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); Institute for Education Sciences (IES)

Other Federally Funded Sites: The Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center; The National High School Center; The Center on Innovation and Improvement; The Center on Instruction; Education Commission of the States; Regional Resource Centers

Additional Data Resources: SRI International; ERIC; <http://www.google.com>; <http://www.goglescholar.com>; general internet search

Criteria for inclusion:

When Reference Desk Researchers review resources, they consider, among other things, four factors:

1. **Date of the publication:** The most current information is included unless in the case of nationally known seminal resources
2. **Source and funder of the report/study/brief/article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols;
3. **Methodology:** i.e. Random control trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc. Priority for inclusion is given generally to random control trial study findings; however, the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: Numbers of participants (just a few? Thousands?); Selection (did the participants volunteer in the study, or were they chosen?); Representation (were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?)
4. **Existing knowledge base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is slim or non-existent. In these cases we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, etc.

REL Northeast and Islands

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