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ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ONLINE AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

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Abstract

Students exposed to authentic materials in the foreign language classroom are better able to process foreign language input in real-life situations and have a more positive attitude towards learning the foreign culture. However, exposure to authentic materials can also result in reactions of anxiety and frustration on the part of the foreign language learner. By providing access to authentic content online, the pedagogical benefits of the use of authentic material can be maximized, while some of the drawbacks inherent in such use can be mitigated. In this article, we discuss how the use of online technologies offers opportunities to provide access to authentic material that is engaging, appropriate, and affordable. By using the multi-media capabilities of a Course Management System (CMS) to deliver authentic materials online, instructors of French, Italian, and Chinese were able to both positively impact student attitudes toward the subject matter and to design learning and evaluation activities that increased student engagement. We find that using technology to deliver authentic

materials can help alleviate student anxiety associated with being exposed to authentic foreign language. Furthermore, students become active participants in the learning process and are able to employ their own learning style. We conclude by discussing the limitations and implications of our findings and making suggestions for future research.

Today's foreign language and culture instructors face many challenges. In many cases, students enroll in foreign language and culture courses in order to satisfy degree requirements and thus have little intrinsic interest in the subject matter. In their quest to motivate and engage these learners, instructors are simultaneously faced with several practical challenges, such as the lack of authentic materials in many existing textbooks, the limited selection of textbooks in less commonly taught languages, and the paucity of materials that are engaging, appropriate, and cost-effective. Based on three case studies, we propose that through the use of technology, students can be provided with online access to authentic, appropriate, and affordable content. We also show how the meaningful use of instructional technology can help create learning environments that engage students. Before entering into a detailed description of the three case studies, we will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using authentic materials and technology in the foreign language classroom.

BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

In the context of teaching foreign languages and cultures, authentic materials have been defined by Rogers and Medley (1988) as “samples that reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers” (p. 468). There has been an increasing trend towards their incorporation into foreign language and cultural classrooms for the past twenty years (Geltirch-Ludgate & Tovar, 1987; Lewis, 1997; Martínez, 2002; Rogers & Medley, 1988; Willis 1999). Research shows that authentic materials permit teachers to promote communication based on conveying and perceiving meaningful information (Rogers & Medley, 1988); they allow students to function in the language they are studying, especially outside the classroom, where they are unlikely to understand every word that is spoken or written (Kmieciak & Barkhuizen, 2006); and finally, they “provide the necessary context for appropriately relating form to meaning in the language acquisition process” (Bacon & Finneman, 1990, p. 459). Overall, “exposition to

authentic input is a discriminating factor in the acquisition of competence in the foreign language” (Martínez, 2003, p. 134).

Moreover, in addition to having a beneficial effect on language learning, the use of authentic materials results in a more positive attitude towards the target culture (Westphal, 1986). For example, “in terms of affect, authentic texts are regarded as motivators and as a means to overcome the cultural barrier to language learning” (Bacon & Finneman, 1990, p. 461). It is therefore beneficial to incorporate authentic materials into the teaching of both foreign language and culture. Indeed, for instructors of foreign culture courses taught in English, where language is not a barrier to learning, using authentic materials allows students to connect with the target culture in a more personal way than if the culture is presented uniquely through someone else’s narrative. In other words, when students interact directly with authentic materials, the ‘middleman’ (the textbook writer) is removed from the equation and students can engage with the culture on their own terms.

However, it should also be noted that some studies (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) indicate that students can experience anxiety when faced with authentic materials: “situations of authentic language input may be perceived as entailing risk and may heighten the anxiety response ... of the learner such that comprehension is affected” (Bacon & Finneman, 1990, p. 461). In fact, some studies have found that language learners prefer non-authentic materials, defined as materials expressly created for the foreign language learner (Gallien, Hotho & Staines, 2000; Kmiecik & Barkhuizen, 2006). In addition to anxiety, students may also experience frustration when they are unable to understand authentic language input, which may negatively impact their receptiveness to authentic material (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Guariento & Morely, 2000).

The use of authentic materials in foreign language and culture instruction is thus highly desirable, but such a use must take into account some of their negative repercussions on student learning. It is our argument that by exposing students to authentic materials in a setting where they have more control over the pace of the authentic language input, foreign language and culture instructors can alleviate students’ anxiety and increase their motivation. For example, by presenting authentic materials online, students have all the advantages offered by authentic documents, but can also determine how and when they engage with them: by replaying key sections of an audio recording or by taking more time than is usually available during an in-class activity to decipher a text. Moreover,

once the cycle of anxiety and frustration has been broken, they will likely experience less stress when faced with authentic language in a live setting. The integration of technology to provide students with authentic materials therefore becomes an important instructional strategy for foreign language and culture educators.

TECHNOLOGY IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE TEACHING

Online technologies have the power to make authentic materials instantly accessible to learners in the language and culture classroom. Blake (1998) observes that “technology can play an important role in fostering second language acquisition by electronically increasing learners’ contact with a wide array of authentic materials” (p. 210). There is increasing evidence that learning environments that incorporate online and digital media in pedagogically sound ways can facilitate second-language acquisition (Blake, 2011).

Current practices in language teaching increasingly reflect a movement away from envisioning language learning as a subconscious and largely passive acquisition of language, primarily through exposure to the spoken word, and toward a more proactive, conscious, cognitive endeavor in which the learner is encouraged to access, evaluate, and deploy strategically his or her own learning methods in a deliberate manner (Brown, 2006). Pedagogical principles for undergraduate education advocated by Chickering and Gamson (1987) include bringing about cooperation among students, deploying active learning techniques, creating opportunities for students to exhibit and exploit their talents, and creating an environment that addresses the multiple learning styles of students. Carmean and Haefner (2002) state that deeper learning occurs when learning is social, active, contextual, engaging, and student-owned. According to them, such learning maximizes students’ internalization of the taught knowledge and skills, and results in a “meaningful understanding of material and content” (p. 29).

Online technologies can be used as powerful tools to realize these principles in language and culture education. Course Management Systems (CMS), for example, with their integrated communication tools such as email, chat, and discussion boards can create effective learning environments by making learning more social, enjoyable, and less stressful (Carmean & Haefner, 2002). The deployment of a CMS facilitates cognitive processes in language learning (Hanson-Smith, 2000). Brown (2006) argues that two areas of computer-

enhanced instruction in particular seem fruitful: internet exchanges and simulations. A CMS, for example, proves to be a very useful tool towards this end: it employs various cognitive stimuli both in the presentation of material and in the design of learning activities. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) noted that technology is able to present visuals effectively, and engage students in “direct, vicarious, and virtual experiences” (p. 3). Moreover, according to them, technology enables students to engage in activities that require higher-order skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application. In addition, technology fosters self-reflection, self-evaluation, collaboration, and group problem solving (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996).

Carmean and Haefner (2002) note that when students discover for themselves course-related content using a CMS, it also brings about student engagement. At the same time that a CMS enables students to access course material and independent learning resources, it also allows them to seek answers at their own time and own pace. As a result, students are able to control and own their learning. For example, the creation of a PowerPoint presentation enables students to “construct their own representations of the new knowledge and share those representations with the instructor or the rest of the class” (Carmean & Haefner, 2002, p. 32). Such an activity reflects the contextual nature of learning, i.e. the integration of new material by learners.

In addition to providing authentic materials, Hanson-Smith (2000) also suggests that online materials can cater to individual learning styles, since technology on its own is methodology-neutral and allows students to interact with the materials according to their own learning style, rather than have a learning style imposed through the instructor’s design of the course materials. Technology therefore allows students to control their learning environment.

Technology is an important tool in the language and culture classroom also because of the learning preferences of our current student population. Today’s students represent the first generation that has grown up with the toys and tools of the digital age (Prensky, 2001). Several terms have been used to describe this generation, including Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001), and NetGen (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). The NetGen as typically visually literate, having the unique ability to weave together images, text, and sound in a natural way, and to assimilate disparate information from multiple sources (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Digital natives prefer environments which facilitate social networking and excel when provided with immediate and tangible rewards (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives are very well equipped to work with different inputs (video,

audio, and visual), gather information from various sources, and reformulate ideas drawn from new contexts. For gains in language instruction, Blake (2011) suggests tapping into current language students' digital competence and predisposition for social networking.

Learning environments and methodologies that closely align with this generation's communication styles and learning preferences may enhance their learning. The use of the Internet, new media, and emerging technologies in the teaching of foreign language and culture offers instructors multiple tools to design such learner-oriented settings. Technology can be an effective medium to reach out to our current student population and communicate with them in their own language. Furthermore, it can also positively impact their motivation and engagement.

Thus the literature reviewed suggests that the use of technology in language and culture instruction could maximize the advantages and minimize the drawbacks of using authentic materials in the teaching of foreign language and culture, and do so in a manner that is in alignment with the learning styles of the current student population.

PURPOSE OF PAPER

The primary purpose of this paper is to examine how the use of technology could address the need to incorporate authentic materials into instruction in a way that maximizes their benefits and reduces students' anxiety. Through three case studies we will demonstrate how the use of technology in conjunction with authentic materials allows foreign language and culture instructors to exploit their instructional benefits, while minimizing their adverse effects. Specifically, the questions examined in this paper are:

- How does instructional technology help alleviate anxiety in students facing authentic materials while adapting to their unique learning styles?
- How can the use of online technologies increase student engagement?
- How can the use of online technologies address the need for appropriate and affordable content in teaching Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs)?

METHODOLOGY

Three instructional technology projects serving as case studies form the basis for this paper. The case studies were conducted at Wayne State University, which is under public control and classified as a research institution. Wayne State University is an urban-setting institution with an undergraduate student enrollment of approximately 20,000. The average GPA of enrolled freshmen is 3.12 and their ACT scores have an average of 20.9. Our first-year student retention rate was 69% in 2005, and the six-year graduation rate is 34%. Many of Wayne State University's students come from low-income families and are dependent on financial aid to complete their education. It bears mentioning that the majority of the students in these three classes fall between the ages of 18 and 30, i.e. within the age group defined by Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) as NetGen.

The three case studies were carried out in three lower-level undergraduate foreign language and culture classes at Wayne State University. The three courses are French 2720, Contemporary Francophone Quebec Culture with an enrollment of 22, Italian 1020, Beginning Italian with an enrollment of 25, and Chinese 2020, Intermediate Chinese with an enrollment of 20. Students primarily take these classes to fulfill their college's foreign language or foreign culture requirements.

This investigation was funded by the Foreign Language Technology Center (FLTC) and the Humanities Center at Wayne State University. As part of a competitive process the three instructors received individual grants from the FLTC to develop instructional technology interventions to enhance their language and culture courses. Faced with the pressure of improving retention and graduation rates, the three faculty members teaching their required classes wanted to explore ways to motivate and engage their students by integrating technology into their curricula. The three instructors designed, developed, and implemented their projects, with the assistance and direction of the director of the FLTC, who specializes in online program implementation and collaborated on synthesizing the research findings. While two of the instructors had some previous experience with integrating technology into their curriculum the third instructor was a novice in using technology tools. Grant funds were used by the three lead investigators to hire technical assistants to work on the development of their projects. In their endeavor to be reflective practitioners the three instructors shared the results of their projects in formal and informal venues within Wayne State University before writing up their results in this paper.

In the following section we describe each case study in detail outlining the unique challenges, the implementation and the results. We analyzed students'

grades, instructors' teaching evaluation scores, and students' open-ended teaching evaluation comments to answer the research questions we have listed above. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and recommendations for future projects.

CASE STUDIES

A French Virtual Book

The Challenge: Lack of Textbook

Despite the fact that there is no lack of authentic materials for French language courses, the challenge in designing French 2720, a course in contemporary francophone Quebec culture, was not to find textbooks or authentic materials in French, but rather in English, the language in which the course is taught as a General Education course. Although textbooks are available in English for continental French culture, no teaching materials are available in English on contemporary Quebec culture. This lack of available materials, a situation similar to that of Italian and Chinese language teaching materials, was therefore the main impetus to create a virtual textbook of online materials. Rather than creating a course-pack of cobbled-together printed materials, the instructor chose to create online teaching materials in order to tap into student familiarity and ease with multimedia materials. This was done in the expectation that student engagement with the material would be increased (Prensky, 2001; Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006). In addition, since student motivation in Gen. Ed. courses is not as high as in French language courses, Prof. S uses authentic materials to improve student affect and increase enthusiasm for the subject of Quebec culture.

Design, Development and Implementation: The Quebec Culture Virtual Textbook

First, a course syllabus was established with five 'chapters', each with a list of topics to be studied. A student assistant then scoured reliable websites identified by the instructor (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) archives was the principal source) and chose print, audio, video, and graphic materials that dealt with the various chapter topics. The materials found are authentic in the sense that they were produced for internal consumption within a foreign, bilingual culture, Canada, but not for teaching purposes. Finally, the assistant created hyperlinks within a pre-existing CMS (Blackboard) website. In

addition to the numerous hyperlinks and occasional downloaded documents, the Virtual Textbook also contains Word documents generated by the instructor – the syllabus, study guides, exam outlines, and assignment descriptions – and, more importantly, PowerPoint documents created both by the instructor and the students. Such files were included to guide students through the large amount of unprocessed authentic materials as a means to provide scaffolding for students who might be overwhelmed by the large amount of authentic documents. In addition to the teaching materials, an online discussion board is used within Blackboard, and students take online midterm and final exams in Blackboard. Students taking this course in contemporary Quebec culture are therefore spared the expense of costly course materials, an important consideration, given the student demographic at Wayne State University.

Results: Independent and Active Learning, Student Motivation, Student Engagement

By clicking on these hyperlinks, and then on embedded hyperlinks within the linked webpages, students are encouraged to move beyond the Virtual Textbook and conduct independent research on the web. In other words, by consulting the online materials that are provided in the course, students can immediately and easily conduct further research into a topic, something that paper-based textbooks do not permit. This outcome is consistent with Carmean and Haefner's (2002) findings that the use of technology leads to greater independence in student learning.

The authentic online materials also offer the advantages outlined above in terms of fostering a more positive attitude towards the foreign culture (Dongkyoo, 2000; Kienbaum, Russell & Welty, 1986; Nostrand, 1989; Thanajaro, 1990; Westphal, 1986). For example, in one unit, students study the Richard Riot which occurred in Montreal in 1955. When the popular Montreal hockey player Maurice Richard was suspended by the league commissioner just before the playoffs, French Canadians perceived this as an act of discrimination and took to the streets to riot. Students listen to play-by-play of the hockey game and view video footage of the commissioner being pelted with debris and the subsequent riot in the streets of Montreal; finally they listen to the radio broadcast that Maurice Richard made in both French and English to calm the crowds and avoid further violence. Rather than reading a dry account of an historical event, students are drawn into the emotions communicated by the authentic multimedia documents they are exposed to and as a result become more interested in the underlying subject matter: conflict between the French and

English in 1950s Montreal. In the case of this course in foreign culture, it is clear that the use of authentic materials aids in student motivation, an especially important factor given the mandatory nature of the course.

Two of the evaluation activities in French 2720 require students to integrate the multimedia authentic materials available within the course website into PowerPoint documents. First in a group assignment presented in class, and then in an individual presentation submitted to the instructor at the end of the course, students are required to weave together different segments of information – in text, graphic, audio, and video formats – into a coherent presentation that both other students, with their limited background knowledge, and the instructor, with her extensive knowledge of the subject, can easily assimilate. As Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) noted, for digital natives and NetGens who grew up in a culture of sound bites, video clips and catchy slogans, combining these elements is not difficult. The challenge comes in synthesizing the different media clips into a presentation that analyses cultural issues in a meaningful way, and this is where students can simultaneously engage their technological prowess and develop higher-order thinking skills.

The use of multi-media authentic materials, which students must then organize into two different PowerPoint presentations, facilitates active learning, and leads to increased student engagement with the topic. Because students must work together to create and present their group presentation to the class, students become responsible to each other for their learning rather than being uniquely responsible to the instructor. In addition, when students know that their PowerPoint presentation will be archived in Blackboard for all students to review prior to the midterm and final, they become accountable to each other for the creation of learning materials. Finally, students must also participate in an online discussion board. This activity once again requires students to interact with each other rather than their instructor, and therefore makes learning a social activity that naturally elicits participation, particularly from students who for various reasons do not speak up in in-class discussions. Given the low initial interest from students taking the course, it is clear that the use of CMS to deliver authentic, multimedia learning materials in an online environment has increased student engagement with the topic of Quebec culture. This impression is borne out in student evaluations. One student commented that “I felt like I really had a hand in actually teaching myself from the multimedia aspect to the lectures and JUCY (sic) discussions.” Another student noted that “I liked the fact that it was so different from the traditional classes that the university offers. I liked the fact that there was no book to read, and much of the education came from the study of

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the Quebec media ..., I think that was a great way to learn. It really gives you a sense of the culture instead of just learning facts about it. Facts can be easily forgotten (sic) and if necessary looked up. However the impression of Quebec, that this class has given me, is one whose memory will last much longer.”

When filling out teaching evaluations, students in this course consistently gave higher scores for satisfaction with the course compared with initial enthusiasm for taking the course. Over four semesters using the virtual textbook, average initial enthusiasm for the course was 6.675 out of 10, or 67%. However, student evaluation of satisfaction with the course upon completion was 12.175 out of 15, or 81%. We suggest that this 14% difference is the result of greater student engagement in the course and with other students. As we have seen from the literature review, using technology meaningfully engages students with the course material. Some students did not appreciate the collaborative and interactive nature of the student assignments. While it can be broadly concluded that NetGen students enjoy social learning, some students remain staunchly individualist in their learning style and prefer to work independently. Given relatively low initial student enthusiasm for this course, however, fostering social learning opportunities still provides a measurable boost in student engagement.

Italian Web-based Activities

The Challenge: Lack of materials with authenticity, interactivity and content-based activities

Prof. P has created several activities for his beginning Italian class, Italian 1020, over the past years with the help of technology. These activities are created to overcome what he considers to be missing from the available Italian textbooks, namely a lack of authenticity, interactivity, and content-based activities. A quick survey of the publications of textbooks for Italian language classes corroborates this impression.

In addition to the lack of Italian teaching materials, Mason (1997) and Arthur (1995) point out the absence of diversity in pedagogical methods. In comparison with the number of textbooks available for Spanish, German, and French, Mason (1997) holds that “fewer pedagogical materials are published for learning Italian” (p. 523). In her review of seven introductory-level Italian textbooks, Arthur (1995) reveals that “by and large the teaching of Italian at the elementary level has been dominated by texts that are re-issued in upgraded editions” (p. 452). However, these new editions, she adds, do not show significant updates reflecting

newer teaching approaches and methodologies and in sum, she concludes, “the playing field is certainly smaller where Italian is concerned, and, as a result, teachers of Italian do not have the same breadth and depth of selection when it comes to choosing textbooks for the classroom” (p. 465).

A more frustrating characteristic of the textbooks Prof. P has used is the lack of authentic materials. In many cases, the reading, audio, and video materials are created to be fully understood by the students. Therefore, such materials do not represent the experience of being exposed to the language as it is used by native speakers. On the other hand, using ‘raw’ materials from media resources such as movies, television, and music CDs, and incorporating Internet resources allows students to access authentic materials, preparing them to engage in conversations with native speakers. Following Walz’s (1998) assertion that the Internet should be considered the best source for authentic materials because of its daily updates that are geared towards native speakers, Prof. P sees the Internet as a source for creating task-based activities. As Blake (2001) points out, the Web, with its variety of inputs (texts, images, and videos) seems distinctively adapted to the task of helping students gain access to authentic language. Moreover, employing internet-based activities permits teachers to address another deficiency evident in many foreign language textbooks, i.e. the lack of interactivity that enhances engagement, particularly among NetGen students, who prefer learning in a social environment. In Italian language textbooks, vocabulary is often presented as a list of words to be memorized and used in the context of grammar-based exercises. Websites, with their active links, images, sounds, and texts, are purposely interactive and user-friendly, and consequently more engaging.

For these reasons, the Internet constitutes a very useful tool for teaching vocabulary and cultural content as well as for engaging students with authentic materials. In the next section, Prof. P will show that authenticity and interactivity are the two characteristics that make internet-based materials particularly appealing to language teachers.

Design, Development and Implementation: The Travel Plan Design and Personal Assistant Role-Play

Prof. P. used the travel plan design task along with the materials presented in the seventh chapter of his textbook (Ciao! 6th ed., Dal Martello, C. M., Larese Riga, C. Heinle, 2006). This chapter focuses mainly on vocabulary related to travel, expressions of time, and the past tense. In the first activity, students are required to plan a trip to Italy using Italian railroad and airline websites. They

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work in small groups and are given a destination to reach from Rome during their stay in Italy. During the first part of the activity, students work on geographical questions and discuss advantages and disadvantages of traveling by train and by airplane. The main part is to be completed by exploring the websites provided by the instructor. Students must justify their choices among the given options, and complete charts with required information. In the end, students are required to write a postcard to describe their travel experience.

Prof. P prepared the personal assistant role-play to go along with the tenth chapter of the textbook. The vocabulary of this chapter focuses on clothing items and imperative expressions. The students are provided with a situation and two roles: a personal assistant and her boss who are traveling together. The boss' luggage is lost at the airport and the assistant needs to buy new clothes for her. First the two students decide the type of clothing items to buy (formal or casual, for example). Then, they complete a chart with information regarding the items the boss wants: color, size, and fabric. Finally, using the links provided by the instructor, the students work with three online shops to buy these clothes within a certain budget. During this part of the activity, the students take notes on the prices of the items bought in order to compare the expenses of different groups in the classroom in a closing discussion.

Results: Better Student Engagement, Independent and Active Learning

In today's classroom, students are more ready to engage in learning activities supported by the Internet. With these internet-based activities, the curiosity of Prof. P.'s students for Italian culture is stimulated. In addition, by touching on students' technological skills and reenacting everyday life experiences, their interest receives a positive boost. Considering that in second language acquisition, student attitude, in particular motivation, is one of the most important factors for successful learning (Gardner, 1972, 1985, 1994), the use of the Internet in language teaching has enormous potential.

In addition, students were more inclined to collaborate with their peers while working on the tasks assigned and showed persistence in trying to solve the linguistic, cultural, or pragmatic problems they encountered in the classroom. These were two positive effects of the technological skills of today's students and of their fearless attitude toward the online environment (McGrath, 1998). The positive consequences of this comfortable feeling Prof. P's students share are twofold: first, students are encouraged to approach the authentic material with less fear because their mastery of the tools balances their language deficiencies

and their difficulties in fully understanding the material. Second, students feel confident in working independently or with lesser guidance from their teachers.

These considerations are corroborated by some of the students' comments that Prof. P. gathered through the activity evaluation forms. As one of the students stated, the Personal Assistant activity provided "a fun way to learn about fashion. I really enjoyed it." For the same activity, another student highlighted: "This was an interesting way to learn about shopping and the current vocabulary. I enjoyed it." Another comment on the Travel Plan activity, on the other hand, speaks to students' positive attitude toward the use of online resources: "The computer exercises help learn from Italian websites."

In communicative language teaching, fostering an independent learning environment through student-centered activities is a key for success (Brown, 2006). The use of web-based activities helps to achieve this goal. During the task-based activities, the instructor's role is that of a "facilitator," that is, he guides the classroom activities, but is not the only one responsible for their learning. When using technology for language teaching, teachers have to be ready to relinquish some of the power linked to their traditional authoritative position. It is worthwhile to stress, though, that this power is not given to the computer or to the technological tools; instead, it is given to the learners themselves who have the responsibility to research and construct meaning from the material presented or employed through technology. As McGrath (1998) suggests, introducing technology in the language classroom facilitates the creation of a more equal balance of power between teachers, who become facilitators, and students, who become active learners.

Allowing students to access online materials in the classroom is not without drawbacks. It is undeniably difficult to control what students are surfing on the internet. Also, with the increasing popularity of such instant online translation services as Google Translation, some students didn't rely on their own linguistic skills in Italian for decoding. To address these challenges the instructor should lay down specific policies and procedures to make sure students stay on task. Compared with traditional printed, audio, or video authentic materials, online authentic materials, however, have the advantage of having handy online dictionaries that can more conveniently and instantaneously help students with the vocabulary not included in the textbook.

Home-made Video Vignettes for Online Chinese Teaching

The Challenge: Authenticity vs. Appropriateness and Affordability

The teaching of Chinese as a foreign language is becoming more widespread in America, but, with Chinese still being an uncommonly taught language, there is still a great paucity of inspiring, authentic, appropriate, and affordable teaching materials (Wen, 2012; Xing, 2006). The majority of the handful of existing textbooks reflect a grammar-translation approach to teaching methodology. On top of this traditional bias against non-written language skills, compared with Spanish and French, the market for Chinese teaching materials is still not very profitable, which prevents Chinese teaching materials from keeping abreast with current second-language-acquisition and applied linguistic theories. Instead of waiting for better quality textbooks to become available, Prof. H. decided to create his own homemade video vignettes to supplement his current teaching materials and to take advantage of their various multi-media functions. His project targeted Chinese 2020, an intermediate Chinese language class..

We have discussed the advantages of using authentic materials in the first section of this article; but of course, all language teachers are faced with the dilemma of balancing authenticity with appropriateness when it comes to choosing teaching materials. Such a concern is more intense when it comes to Chinese teaching, due to the diglossia between its written and spoken forms and its large variety of dialects. These concerns led to the creation of online homemade video vignettes, which aim to engage students, neutralize the conflict between authenticity and appropriateness, and provide affordable textbook material to Chinese language students.

Design, Development and Implementation: Home-made Video Vignettes

Prof. H initially tried to find freely available materials that suited his pedagogical objectives, but was unable to do so. He therefore decided to generate his own materials during a study-abroad trip to China. These materials are therefore not intended for circulation uniquely among native speakers, as Rogers and Medley (1988) posit in their definition of authentic materials, but still largely correspond to their criteria: they contain spontaneous speech acts generated by native speakers of the language.

Prof. H. filmed two hours of footage of conversations with Chinese people, where he asked them to speak about a particular topic in order to elicit the use of certain vocabulary or syntactic structures. A student assistant then transferred all

the footage into a DVD format and segmented and numbered it into episodes. Prof. H chose 5 episodes that involve the relevant structures and vocabulary that might be useful and interesting for CHI 2020. The student assistant posted the selected episodes onto Blackboard; then, using the Chinese input function, he created exercises, with the test-designing functions in Blackboard. There were three types of exercises: circle the verbs you hear in this conversation (multiple choice), dictation (students need to submit through email), and fill in the blanks. Although such online activities are not communicative in nature, they do allow learners to interact with authentic materials at their own pace by controlling the number of repetitions each student is most comfortable with, thereby increasing the sense of control over the learning environment. These online activities also provide immediate feedback to students, again increasing their sense of control over the learning process.

Results: Affordable, Engaging, Manageable and Effective in Receptive Skills and Culture Training

Among the three types of language teaching input materials: print, audio, and video (Rogers & Medley, 1988), why did Prof. H choose the format of video and why did he prefer to put them online? These home-made videos are cheaper to use than clips from existing Chinese movies. After the initial investment, i.e., a digital video camera, set-up and training, future implementation of this project will literally cost nothing. Furthermore, the multi-media nature of videos caters to today's students' multimodal learning style (Norton & Toohey, 2004) and motivates them to learn. Rogers and Medley (1988) suggest that students will not have the desire to persevere in the task unless there is some motivation: either intrinsic or extrinsic.

Rogers and Medley (1988) have argued that although authentic materials can be used as resources for cultural information as well as the basis for speaking and writing activities, they are best suited for the development of skills in listening and reading comprehension. Developing reading and writing skills through the help of printed materials is overemphasized in traditional Chinese pedagogy, due in part to the difficulty of the Chinese writing system. While audio can isolate listening exercises, video can do more by training students to interpret other essential communicational cues, like gestures and facial expressions that might be language- and culture-specific (Hanson-Smith, 2000). The options of keeping the captioning on or off, or partially on, or on a timer, mean that each video can not only serve as a reading exercise, but also diversify the choices for listening comprehension exercises. Also, when aimed more at receptive skills, these clips

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can expose the students to a larger variety of linguistic registers and pragmatic styles used by different speakers, instead of solely to those of their teacher.

Here is an example to illustrate the advantage of video over print when it comes to introducing authentic culture, which in turn facilitates reading comprehension. As shown below in translation, this is a simple reading exercise in the textbook. The majority of the students do not have problems with the structures or the vocabulary they encounter in this reading, but still think they might have misread the passage:

Lao Zhang invites Xiao Zhang to have lunch in a Chinese restaurant. Lao Zhang, in order to show his generosity, orders a lot of meat dishes that are more expensive, without knowing, however, that Xiao Zhang is a vegetarian. After the dishes are served, Lao Zhang does not eat too much, hoping that Xiao Zhang would eat more. In the end, both of them are very hungry after the lunch.

The students are confused as to why Lao Zhang does not eat ‘his’ own meat dish, although he is not a vegetarian. Without the visual aids but only the written text, there is no way for the students to decode the cultural convention that in a Chinese restaurant, people share dishes rather than eating what they have ordered for themselves, which is crucial but neglected in this reading exercise. If such a situation was presented to the students on a video clip, they might be able to perceive and absorb the cultural difference immediately, even though not necessarily consciously, whether the Chinese-speaking teacher has taken this for granted or not.

There are three factors that one should take into account when selecting authentic materials: the item’s suitability, its interest, and the appropriateness of task and sequence. If the language teacher tapes her own videos, there is control over not just the vocabulary and structures used to match the students’ level, but also in the choice of topics that might be interesting to a certain group of students. For example, our students from Detroit, the Motor City, might be more responsive to a scene in which there is a Ford parked on a Shanghai street.

Judging from student evaluations, Prof. H. could see that students appreciated the online testing function the most. Compared with the traditional pen-and-paper method, students stated that they were more “relaxed and could write more legibly”. In the meantime, many students enjoyed the video input more than the audio input for listening comprehension, which “could let us rely on more information to figure out what is being talked about”; in general,

students found that “it’s more interesting” to watch videos than to listen to audio by itself. Making authentic Chinese speech less intimidating to students through the use of careful editing and the creation of online exercises geared to the skill level of the learner results in less student frustration and greater engagement with the target language. Prof. H has thus preemptively dealt with one drawback of authentic materials, namely their potential to create anxiety amongst beginning language learners (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

In the course evaluation, one student complained about having to listen to the video clips over and over again in order to figure out the missing words for a fill-in-the-blanks exercise. This process eliminated the need for the student to pay attention to the overall cultural aspects of the video clip. This shortcoming can be fixed by creating some exercises that focus more on contextual information rather than on grammatical aspects. In course evaluations, student GPA rose from 2.8 in the three semesters before the online video vignettes were introduced to 2.9 in the three semesters afterward. In addition, overall student evaluations rose from 13.1 on a 15 point scale to 13.3. While incremental, these improved metrics point to the positive outcome attributable to the incorporation of online teaching materials into the curriculum.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The comments received from the students serve as useful testimonies about how students positively relate to integrating instructional technology in the foreign language and culture classroom. Among the positive comments, some FRN 2720 students addressed how the online learning strategies made them feel empowered as a learner and how comfortable the learning process became; some ITA 1020 students associated ‘learning’ with ‘fun’ and learning Italian with surfing Italian websites; CHI 2020 students benefited from the instant responses provided by the online testing system and from the welcome exposure to real-life Chinese culture online. Although these improvements in learning and in teaching may not be the sole result of the use of technology in these courses, they nonetheless represent indicators of the promising outcome of involving technology in teaching. In addition to the negative student comments already noted, the three instructors also received a small number of negative comments that pertain to accessing data, connecting to the websites, and the limitations of Blackboard, the CMS used. For example, one student wished she could save all the online quizzes and exams for easier future review.

With these three case studies, we illustrate how material that is authentic, interactive, engaging, appropriate, and affordable can be incorporated into foreign language and culture teaching through the means of technology. In all three cases, the incorporation of authentic on-line materials, often through the medium of a CMS, resulted in environments where learning was independent, social and student-owned. In addition, we conclude that the use of authentic materials resulted in a more positive student attitude towards the foreign language and/or culture. Today's digital native students can be more independent, motivated and engaged learners, when instructors create learning environments that consider their communication preferences and tap into their technology skills. Also, incorporating technology into the teaching of LCTLs can help introduce less-familiar linguistic and cultural phenomena more efficiently than printed text. Finally, since two of the three case studies involved the use of material that was not fully authentic by Rogers and Medley (1988)'s definition, we wonder if the definition should be broadened; perhaps complete authenticity in language documents is not the holy grail of language teaching.

Our study is also of relevance given the recent increases in the number of fully online and blended language courses. Winke, Goertler, and Amuzie (2010) note: "Over the last 10 years, there has been a trend in foreign language departments of offering hybrid or fully online distance learning classes to address issues of over enrollment, lack of classroom space, lack of qualified instructors, and budget cuts" (p. 199). Although this increase in enrollment has been experienced in both commonly taught languages (CTLs) and LCTLs, the situation for LCTLs appears to be particularly dire (Thompson & Schneider, 2012; Winke et al., 2010). Thompson and Schneider (2012) note that there is a paucity of high-quality teaching materials, particularly online content, for LCTL courses. This dearth of online pedagogical material for LCTLs is particularly critical in light of the recent trend of increase in enrollments in the LCTL courses (Thompson & Schneider, 2012). The use of online technologies can also be an effective way to reduce costs involved in language instruction, particularly in LCTL, which are being threatened even more by current spending cuts across campuses (Carr, Crocco, Eyring, & Gallego, 2011). The three case studies in this paper describe the creation of online authentic material for three less commonly taught language and culture courses (considering that a course on Quebec culture is taught in English). By providing valuable insights about creating online authentic material we believe that our study makes an important contribution for those looking to integrate online language modules into their language and culture instruction, particularly for LCTL courses.

With regard to the efficacy of online language instruction, Blake (2011) stated that the research on different forms of online language learning (web-facilitated, hybrid, or totally virtual) is still meager but growing. Our research takes us a step further by establishing the benefits of integrating online language and culture modules into a regular face-to-face instructional environment.

Incorporating authentic materials into foreign language and culture courses via CMS is thus an important strategy in the teaching of LCTFLs. However, our study has also raised some concerns that instructors might consider as they decide how best to integrate technology into their teaching practices. These concerns include:

Without regard to a lack of existing materials, should technology be employed uniformly or should we tailor it to different class needs? For example, French is the second most commonly taught language in America and has more resources, but how can technology facilitate a Quebec culture class, which is not that commonly taught? Italian and Chinese are less commonly taught and have very limited resources. In particular, how can Chinese, with its unique writing system and non-Indo-European roots, take advantage of the instructional technology that is mostly based on Western alphabets and set in a Western culture?

How can we have better control over students' online behaviors if a class involves activities on the internet? And how can we carry out the best curriculum design without yielding to the limitations of today's instructional technology?

Considering that technology is updating and innovating itself at an increasingly fast speed and that our students are often ahead of the curve in matters of technological innovation, how do instructors keep abreast of the application of instructional technology?

During the course of our research, we have seen the emergence of some new technology tools that can be used in the language and culture classroom. Access to authentic materials is no longer dependent on a CMS; mobile technologies such as smartphones and tablet devices (e.g. iPad and Kindle) open up a range of possibilities for the teacher and the learner. How can an instructor keep up with such rapid change and take advantage of the best available technology, even as they devote a large amount of time and energy to other aspects of class preparation? In other words, what would be the golden ratio between the roles of technology and those of the instructor in teaching practice? As Clifford (1987, p. 13) predicted: "while computers will not replace teachers, teachers who use

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computers will eventually replace teachers who don't." (see also Blake (1998, 2001)). Our paper cannot answer all these questions, but we see more future research that will tackle this dilemma.

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