PARTNERS IN INSTRUCTION: THE GRADUATE MEDIA ASSISTANT PROJECT

by Lynne Crandall
University of Michigan

Interactive video, interactive audio, international satellite connections, laser discs of authentic video materials, computer-assisted instruction, multimedia... Advances in technology have made it possible for language instructors to supplement classroom instruction in dynamic and engaging ways. But just as we think we have finally banished the drone of the traditional audio lab, we remember the catch — traditional materials, for all their flaws, are at least ready made. Their dynamic and engaging replacements, possible through today's technology, become real only through faculty time and energy. And these last two are increasingly hard to find, particularly at large research institutions such as the University of Michigan.

In order to encourage faculty to explore the possibilities of the new technology, we had to find a way to address the time and energy dilemma. Our solution was, in effect, to buy them an extra pair of hands: a Graduate Media Assistant (GMA). The GMA Project, now in its second year, supports a graduate student to work with a faculty member on media-based projects designed to accomplish specific learning objectives. The GMA Project complements the Language Lab's normal support activities (media design and application, audio and video production, listening and viewing facilities, audio and video libraries) to enhance foreign language instruction and to meet a continuing need for assistance with the development and implementation of instructional media materials.

The first GMA Project objective is to effect a positive impact on student learning and motivation by exposing students to a wide variety of audio and video materials and inviting them to go beyond the traditional, and often dull, "listen and respond" methodology. An additional assumption is that if students enjoy their second language experience they are more likely to retain skills acquired, and continue in formal or informal foreign language study.

A second objective is to facilitate instructional experimentation and innovation with media by providing intensive personnel support for material development. By providing faculty with an assistant to help select, design and apply audiovisual media to language courses, the faculty member can more easily infuse the curriculum with media materials appropriate to a topic, level or style of teaching. By encouraging and supporting faculty efforts in media implementation, the amount and quality of programmatic media utilization would increase.

The final objective is to communicate innovation and facilitate a cross-departmental flow of ideas. A monthly round table and an annual workshop presented by GMA participants provide a forum by which practices and experiences can be exchanged among all language faculty. Graduate students will learn about technology uses and

Lynne Crandall is Coordinator of A/V Programs at the Language Lab, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

applications via a partnership with the course coordinator and Lab staff.

GMA Project funds are administered directly by the Language Lab. An equitable allocation of monies between departments and languages is set initially by the Lab; funds may be reallocated based on need and proposal submissions. Proposals from faculty are invited at the beginning of the academic year. However, new projects are accepted until funding is exhausted. A graduate media assistant carries out an approved media project under the joint supervision of a course coordinator and Language Lab staff.

Approved media projects must meet two basic conditions. First, the project must involve instructional media. This usually means audio or video, but other possibilities would be considered. Second, description of the project must follow an established format, which includes details as to the project's instructional purpose, an indication of how achieving this purpose will be measured, the project's scope and duration. This information is to ensure that the proposal can be completed with the funds allocated, and also enables us to provide college administration with evidence of the Project's effectiveness.

GMA candidates must be graduate students in good standing in a University of Michigan degree program. They do not have to be foreign language graduate students, although most projects require special language expertise and program familiarity. However, if, for example, a project requires video production, a graduate student in Communications might be targeted for editing. Similarly, the skills of a graduate student in programming might be useful if the target project is to develop computer-based language materials.

In its first year, the GMA Project provided support for ten proposals from Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish. Now in its second year, the Project has, so far, agreed to sponsor six projects in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish, some of which are continuations and variations on last year's successes. Projects have ranged from original audio and video production, identification and selection of topical or level-appropriate media resources, compilation of audio and video resources into meaningful and usable segments, to the development of ancillary materials for existing media resources. With Language Lab support some GMA projects receive additional funding from other University sources.

Elaborating on all of the GMA projects, while tempting, is beyond the scope of this note. However, the following brief samples should help to highlight the scope and variety of project accomplishments.

Authentic Audiovisual Material to Accompany Advanced Proficiency-Based Arabic Syllabus

Raji Rammuny, Near Eastern Studies

The goal of this project was to build advanced listening comprehension skills, develop paralinguistic awareness, improve pronunciation and intonation, and improve oral language skills in a variety of authentic cultural interactions. To accomplish this, 20 video units and 10 audio units, based on authentic audio and video materials collected in Kuwait and Egypt, were created for use in Advanced Proficiency-based Arabic classes. Ancillaries to aid comprehension of the materials, including charts, diagrams, verbal cues and activities were developed. GMA Project tasks included identification, selection and edit preparation of the video materials, and identification and selection of audio materials. Ancillary development and preparation were also GMA duties.

Video Vignettes for Beginning Chinese

Hilda Tao, Asian Languages and Cultures

The objective of this project is to present students with examples of situations they

can apply in daily interactions, facilitate the learning of structures and vocabulary and provide information about the paralinguistic aspects of communication. Script development, including transcription from Chinese characters to the Pinyin system (romanized alphabet script) along with a parallel English translation for production staff use, for the production of 14 short (30 seconds to 7 minutes) video sketches were GMA responsibilities. Additional GMA tasks included checking script authenticity and credibility, and determining word choice and order. Production and post-production activities were funded under a university companion grant.

Introduction of Video Materials into First-Year French Classes: Study of Impact on Student Attitudes and Motivation

Helene Neu, Romance Languages & Literatures

The only empirical research undertaken by the GMA program, this on-going study involved several phases, and was funded by four sponsors. The study examines whether the added visual, linguistic and cultural input provided by working with videos has a positive effect on students' motivation to learn French, on their attitudes about the target culture, and on their enjoyment in and satisfaction with the courses. Three GMAs participated in this project, first screening commercially available video materials (both authentic and produced-for-the-learner programs), selecting appropriate segments to complement the structure of proficiency-based first year courses, and developing pedagogical support materials for in-class and in-lab work. Subsequent phases (not funded by the GMA Project) included teacher training, and preparation of survey instruments and statistical analysis. Preliminary results indicate an increase in listening skill level roughly equivalent to a half semester of conventional instruction, with other conclusions forthcoming.

Watching the News in Russian

Nyusya Milman, Slavic Languages & Literatures

This continuing project is designed to expose third and fourth year Russian students, as well as political and business Russian students, to a variety of Russian speakers as well as familiarize them with the political, social and economic issues facing the Soviet Union. To accomplish this, comprehension support materials were developed based on an entire (50-60 minutes) broadcast of the Soviet news program Vremya. Students are assigned to view one program a week as an in-lab assignment, and are tested monthly on the materials. Broadcasts are occasionally viewed and discussed in class. The GMA tasks include selecting the week's broadcast and designing pre-screening prompts, in English, to prepare students for their listening task. A sample question from one assignment was, "Besides the CPSU, what Soviet political parties do you know about?" A vocabulary list, in Russian and English, is developed, and guided viewing questions, in Russian, help students focus on particular items in the broadcast.

We have received many positive responses from GMA Project participants. The Language Program Coordinators who designed the proposals were able to obtain specific and appropriate instructional aids and resources. In addition, faculty participants gained enthusiasm for media development and applications—a direct result of having the time and assistance of a dedicated helper. Through the participants' excitement over their achievements, the impact of the GMA Project was broadened, and drew in individuals who had not experimented with media in the past. Graduate students who participated as GMAs received hands-on training and experience in instructional media design and application, as well as benefitting from a mentor relationship with an experienced teacher. Stu-

dents responded favorably to the materials on course evaluations and performance levels improved. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students enjoyed their exposure to foreign language media materials: two instructors reported that students requested additional exercises!

Are there improvements needed in the Project? Any drawbacks? Unfortunately, yes. Evaluation is difficult. So far, most projects have measured success by attitudinal change and observation, and thus, little statistical evidence is available to support the general sense of the Project's success. An additional drawback is that funds are not reliable from year to year. While the Project is enthusiastically supported by language faculty and backed by college administration, it is not yet a standard part of the Lab's budget, and funding may not be renewed in lean fiscal times.

From the Lab's viewpoint, the GMA Project has been a success. Overall media utilization has increased. Instructional staff have been provided with help to explore using media in the foreign language curriculum in a comprehensive and meaningful way, and to encourage and challenge students to learn and enjoy speaking a second language. Once instructional staff become familiar with media exploration and course inclusion, development and implementation are not such overwhelming tasks. As one participant stated, "It makes me want to do more!" It is also rewarding to see clusters of students engaged in active in-lab viewing exercises, and not sleeping in a carrel. Comments overheard have included, "Gee, the Lab isn't such a boring place anymore..." That is certainly gratifying!

So, as the drone of the traditional audio lab diminishes, and the hum of an active learning center rises, we must remain focused on fostering exploration and innovation. Maintaining a creatively-charged learning atmosphere is an immense benefit to instructional staff, students and media personnel. Being a partner in such efforts is very stimulating, and keeps us all looking ahead to what's next.