



# Multithreaded Language Learning

Students at Different Levels Working in One Classroom

*Combining students at different levels in one classroom is a challenge. Do you teach everyone the same material? Do you try to let everyone work at their own pace? If you do that, how can you keep the classroom organized? Technology can help teachers manage classrooms of students working at differing levels. In this article, Robert Morrey describes how his students are using technology to design and assess their own third- and fourth-year German language curricula.*

**By Robert A. Morrey**

Subject: Foreign Language  
(German)

Grade Level: 10–12 (Ages 15–18)

Technology: Quelle Writing Assistant for German (Heinle & Heinle), German 1 and German Deutsch Konkret 1, 2, and 3 (Morrey's Microcomputer Materials)

**M**ixed-level classes are common at many U.S. high schools. I teach third- and fourth-year German in mine. Because third- and fourth-year students' language skills are often so different, it has always been a challenge to provide an instructional program that is enough work for fourth-year students yet suited to third-year students. As new technology and other resources have become available over the last 20 years, I've been able to allow students to complete their own self-designed learning programs.

### Multiple Learning Paths in the Advanced World Language Class

In a recent article (Morrey, 1996), I described the use of computers, various video and CD-ROM materials, and other nontechnological resources used in my four-year program. To summarize, by the time students enter the fourth year, they have been exposed to the basic elements of the language and have spent their third year in the combined class. Although the third year has a relatively well-defined curriculum, it is structured quite differently from the first two years and provides students with more freedom and responsibility.

Curricular flexibility is added to the program in the fourth year. The redesigned Level 4 class has been successful from several points of view, not the least of which is the instructor's ability to provide instructional materials and guidance to students whose needs and interests vary quite dramatically. In the last few years, the range and quality of students who are finding success at this level has encouraged me to begin to define more clearly a variety of "threads" or "pathways" that students could select as an area of focus or emphasis. Students are now asked to design a work plan that combines elements from six or seven of the following 10 focus areas.

1. *Review of previous grammar material:* Students select and review older material entirely on the computer.
2. *Advanced grammar study:* Students do in-depth study of grammar topics or study specialized topics using several new books and some computer materials.
3. *Creative writing:* Students write pieces on a variety of topics and in varying lengths on a word processor at home or with a language-specific writing program in the classroom.
4. *Development of speaking skills:* Primarily in class and usually with the teacher, students are encouraged to speak in the world language being studied.
5. *Developing listening skills:* Students listen to and later write about or discuss audiotapes, CDs, and video materials (some materials are available in the classroom and others can be found on the Internet or rented).
6. *World languages and the Internet:* Students read or listen to a variety of world language material over the Internet, sometimes providing a summarizing report and perhaps engaging in person-to-person communication.
7. *Reading:* Students read from two to four small novels using teacher-prepared comprehension aids. Many other and more advanced reading materials are available in the classroom.
8. *Advanced placement:* Students do intensive work in all language skill paths to prepare for the Advanced Placement (AP) language exam.
9. *Reports:* Students produce written, spoken, or video reports in the world language on a wide range of topics.
10. *Vocabulary expansion:* Students continually expand their vocabulary us-

ing computer materials, personal lists, books, and other readings.

### Focus Areas in the Classroom

This type of program is possible only with extensive classroom use of technology. I have a 20-computer LAN, two separate videotape-viewing stations, a laserdisc player, a sound system with audiotape and CD inputs, and eight Internet-ready computers. Review, new grammar, and vocabulary work are done in the classroom using the computers, and tests on these elements are taken on the computer, corrected, and printed for the instructor. Students also can listen to audiotapes and watch videos in the classroom. They are asked to produce their written selections on the computer. Computer access for writing as well as for viewing materials on the Internet is also provided in the classroom.

The instructor's role becomes quite different from the traditional model. I must still be heavily involved in all activities in which speaking the language is the main focus, and I must locate, summarize, or create specialized materials for students with unique needs. I still must provide guidance to the students to help them locate and use the material provided for the different focus areas, and I must be able to help individuals or small groups understand some of the new ideas. Many of the focus areas require the use of technology, and some students will require instruction in the use and care of the equipment.

Recently, I have noted an increasing interest among talented students to do more or to progress faster than what has been traditionally possible or to learn in a manner not previously possible. Two years ago, for the first time I had a fourth-year student who was also enrolled in independent study for the same language—two periods of advanced language study each day—



**Table 1.**

| Student 1      |          |             |              |
|----------------|----------|-------------|--------------|
| Category       | Quantity | Points/Item | Total Points |
| Old Grammar    | 3        | 10          | 30           |
| New Grammar    | 3        | 20          | 60           |
| New Vocabulary | 4        | 20          | 80           |
| Reading        | 8        | 10          | 80           |
| Listening      | 7        | 3           | 21           |
| Speaking       | 2        | 20          | 40           |
| Writing        | 7        | 20          | 140          |
| Total          |          |             | 451          |
| Student 2      |          |             |              |
| Category       | Quantity | Points/Item | Total Points |
| Old Grammar    | 2        | 10          | 20           |
| New Grammar    | 5        | 20          | 100          |
| New Vocabulary | 10       | 20          | 200          |
| Reading        | 3        | 10          | 30           |
| Listening      | 10       | 3           | 30           |
| Speaking       | 2        | 20          | 40           |
| Writing        | 4        | 20          | 80           |
| Total          |          |             | 500          |

and another student at the same level who took classes four days a week at a junior college and only came to my class for two periods one day a week. The latter student used computer programs at home to practice during the week.

#### Procedures for Monitoring Student Progress

Although I maintain some grade information in a spreadsheet, fourth-year students must record their own progress and maintain records that show the work they have completed. Each student prepares a six-week plan at the beginning of each grading period that shows what the student intends to complete. Then each student provides a summary of the work completed at the end of the six weeks. Table 1 shows two actual student plans.

I evaluate the writing and oral activities, but the students control the rest of their grades. At the end of the six-week grading period, each student provides me with a detailed listing of all the work completed during the period and the scores for that work. In effect, this

descriptive list is the student's grade for the period. Using markedly different plans, the two students with the programs shown in Table 2 obtained nearly the same grade. Student 1 earned almost half of her points by writing a long essay (more than 1,100 words) and reading more than eight hours, while Student 2 earned 60% of his points through vocabulary acquisition and new grammar.

#### But Is the Program Successful?

The success of the third- and fourth-year language program at my high school is assessed every year through student surveys, the percentage of students who continue language study, and such national exam scores as the National German Test and the AP exam. On yearly surveys students continually express satisfaction with the course structure and content, and they also have provided suggestions for changes in succeeding years.

Many students continue to the next level of language instruction, even with greatly differing language skills. One of this program's strengths is that students

#### Resources

Three types of resources are critical to the success of my program: software, video and audio materials, and texts.

#### Software

I have created an extensive set of software programs for German, Spanish, and French to provide practice for all the vocabulary I expect my students to learn during their four years in my program. The software also allows students to practice verb forms and grammar agreement. It's available on the computer network in the classroom, and a student version is available for purchase by my students and other interested people for work at home.

Students also use *Quelle Writing Assistant* for German to word process their papers and other written assignments.

#### Video and Audio Materials

I have collected a range of commercially prepared audio and video materials. I currently use seven major series in the first three years of my program, and I have more materials available for the advanced students. Those for the beginning students are highly structured and limited in vocabulary, while the materials for the later classes become progressively less structured and more natural. I attempt to present 10 to 20 minutes of listening material one or two times a week in all my classes to allow my students to hear native speakers in a variety of settings.

#### Texts

Beginning in the second year of language study, all students are asked to complete reading assignments. Second-year students read from one textbook, while third- and fourth-year students select reading material from more than 50 different texts available in class; these materials range from simple beginning readers to sophisticated short stories. The most advanced readers are able to select their reading materials from a broad range of novels, "Krimis," and classic German literature.

The reading material allows students to review vocabulary they have learned, see new words in context, and be exposed on a continual basis to the great variety of syntactical structures used by good writers. Extensive reading is essential for students preparing for the AP examination.

#### Contacts

Software for French, German, and Spanish is available from Morrey's Microcomputer Materials, 3404 Merrimac Dr., San Jose, CA 95117; 408.379.5944; [rmorrey@pacbell.net](mailto:rmorrey@pacbell.net); <http://home.pacbell.net/rmorrey>.

*Quelle Writing Assistant* for German is available from Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 20 Park Plaza, Boston, MA 02116; 800.237.0053 or 617.451.1940; fax 617.426.4379; [www.gale.com/heinle/write.html](http://www.gale.com/heinle/write.html).

Table 2.

| Student 1: First 6 weeks |      |        |          |
|--------------------------|------|--------|----------|
| REVIEW PROGRAMS          | Date | Points | Possible |
| Als, ob, wann,           |      | 10     | 10       |
| Wk Adj Ein 1             |      | 10     | 10       |
| Coord Conj 1             |      | 10     | 10       |
| Total                    |      | 30     | 30       |
| VOCABULARY               | Date | Points | Possible |
| LSP 4                    |      | 20     | 20       |
| LSP 5                    |      | 20     | 20       |
| LSP 3                    |      | 19.5   | 20       |
| LSP 2                    |      | 20     | 20       |
| Total                    |      | 79.5   | 80       |
| NEW GRAMMAR              | Date | Points | Possible |
| "to know"                |      | 20     | 20       |
| Nomen mit -en            |      | 20     | 20       |
| Zeitausdruck             |      | 20     | 20       |
| Total                    |      | 60     | 60       |
| OTHER                    | Date | Points | Possible |
| Essay                    |      | 136    | 140      |
| Speech                   | 10/2 | 18     | 20       |
| Speech                   | 10/3 | 17     | 20       |
| Reading (8.25 hours)     |      | 82.5   | 80       |
| Listening                |      | 21     | 21       |
| Total                    |      | 274.5  | 281      |
| <b>GRADE</b>             | 98   | 444    | 451      |
| Student 2: First 6 weeks |      |        |          |
| REVIEW PROGRAMS          | Date | Points | Possible |
| Wk Adj Ein 1             | 10/3 | 10     | 10       |
| Wk Adj Der 1             | 10/3 | 10     | 10       |
| Total                    |      | 20     | 20       |
| VOCABULARY               | Date | Points | Possible |
| Emil 1-2,3               |      | 40     | 40       |
| LSP2-4                   |      | 60     | 60       |
| Freq L1-5                |      | 100    | 100      |
| Total                    |      | 200    | 200      |
| NEW GRAMMAR              | Date | Points | Possible |
| "to know"                | 10/6 | 20     | 20       |
| Zeitausdrücke            | 10/6 | 20     | 20       |
| Nomen mit-en             | 10/6 | 20     | 20       |
| Verben u. "ZU"           |      | 20     | 20       |
| Noch nicht neg           |      | 20     | 20       |
| Total                    |      | 100    | 100      |
| OTHER                    | Date | Points | Possible |
| Speech                   | 10/7 | 18     | 20       |
| Speech                   | 10/8 | 19     | 20       |
| Reading                  |      | 30     | 30       |
| Listening                |      | 30     | 30       |
| 4 Essays                 |      | 68     | 80       |
| Total                    |      | 165    | 180      |
| <b>GRADE</b>             | 97   | 485    | 500      |

with varied language skills can find language-learning opportunities at their level of achievement. In years past, more advanced students dropped out because they were not challenged, and less advanced students dropped out because they could not keep up. Now there's something for everyone.

Test scores have risen dramatically in the years since I instituted this language curriculum. Previously, students who had no prior background in the German language consistently scored below the 90th percentile. Every year since 1984, approximately 10% of these students have scored above that. In eight of the last 14 years, students who entered the Cupertino High School program without prior knowledge of German have placed from second to 12th in Northern California as a result of their national exam scores, among other factors.

### Conclusion

The availability of a broad range of technology and widely diverse student backgrounds and interests have led to an expanding variety of curricular options for students in upper-level language classes. The thread or pathway options now provide advanced students with a more structured set of choices for developing their learning plans, and they allow me to better handle the needs of advanced students. In an age when we can buy a computer configured to our specifications and order a car directly from the factory with the options we want, shouldn't we also take advantage of technology and provide our students with a variety of learning pathways? ■

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### References

- Morrey, R. A. (1996). Computers and other technology—How is the classroom different? Or, what would happen to your curriculum if the technology of the last twenty years would suddenly vanish? *CUE Newsletter*, 18(5), 12–13.