Tutoring Students Online via Skype Typifies Use of New Standards

FLANC Fall Conference - October 26, 2013

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Focus of this article
Have you ever taught a world language to a student in Switzerland from your home in San Jose using Skype and in the same day tutored another student in Los Gatos, CA? In this presentation I will discuss the procedures and materials that I use to work with these students. Such a program requires extensive online materials at several levels that the students use to learn or review, a Skype or similar Internet connection for verbal interaction, and a teacher/coordinator who is very familiar with the entire curriculum. Since this kind of tutorial program typifies concepts expressed in several newer teaching standards, I will also refer to portions of three sets of standards, including the Common Core State Standards, and how they pertain to learning a world language in an individualized and personalized instructional program.

The current website that I use contains a text copy of this presentation and the texts of two presentations at the Northeast Conference in 2005 and one at the National Education Computing Conference in 2000 that provide a much more detailed description of the use of an Internet-based instructional program for high school students; they are located at: http://morreys-language.com under Conference presentations.

Background
When I began my teaching career, 16mm film projectors, reel-to-reel tape recorders, and filmstrip projectors were the advanced technology. Between 1979 and 2001, my classroom computer system went from one very elementary computer to a Novell-networked computer system of 20 computers with a few computers linked to the Internet. Videotape and laserdiscs were brought in during the mid-eighties and CD's by the mid-nineties. Since 2001 when I retired from full-time teaching, the entire German curriculum has been presented only over the Internet.

These instructional modifications allowed for the introduction of multi-level classes in the mid-eighties and the new technology permitted students who wanted to continue their

study of German to attend during any period of the day. By the late nineties about 10% of the students in the program attended at a different time than the class in which they were enrolled. These students were often the most highly motivated and succeeded remarkably well using the computer-based practice materials, video listening materials, and a variety of textual materials available in the classroom, and so student could be at multiple levels within the one class.

Components of an effective online tutorial program:
    An online tutoring program consists of:

        -- A procedure to determine what the prospective student wants to learn, what that person's current ability with the language is, and the time he/she has to learn.

        -- The very extensive 'Online German Materials' that students will use are the most essential element in the success of this type of tutorial program. Such an extensive online instructional program is essential because the instructor does not have time to build new learning materials for each student who is tutored. It is a sufficient challenge to select among the available materials to sequence the items of most use to this student. The first three levels of my online instructional program each have 10 lesson syllabi which define what vocabulary lists to learn for that lesson and present written explanations of new grammar items with a few written exercises to practice the new grammar items; answers for each written exercise are provided on the lesson syllabus page. In addition to the written exercises, the computer practice programs for each level provide more extensive practice of the new grammar elements and use only vocabulary that has been presented up to that point in the sequence of levels[1]. In the case of the more difficult grammar concepts several computer practice programs are usually provided that are sequenced from easier to more complex. Also included in each three-to-four-week lesson are listening, speaking, and reading activities with suggested sources and/or links to additional online resources for these activities. At the beginning of Level 1 there are also several steps a student needs to complete to establish good pronunciation of German-in my case. Beyond Level 3 there are no developed syllabi, but there is a learning structure and many resources which students use to develop their individual learning plan. These resources still include new grammar explanations, coordinated computer practice programs, and extensive

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[1] The 'Vocabulary and Grammar practice exercises' are computer-based practice exercises that are divided into individual units with each unit focusing on a particular grammar topic or vocabulary list. In the Level 1 materials there are 20 vocabulary units containing about 700 words selected mostly from the "Basic German Dictionary-Grammar – A Dictionary containing the 2500 most commonly used words …" (by EMC Corporation, published in 1973), and 69 other units containing 2263 additional individual practice items. In the Level 2 computer materials there are 20 vocabulary units with about 840 frequency-based words, 50 additional grammar practice units with 1945 individual items. Level 3 contains 750 words in 20 units and 40 additional practice units containing 1710 practice items. Level 4 currently contains 3680 individual items of grammar and vocabulary including an additional 500+ frequency-based items. In total there are now about 11750 computer-based practice items for the students to master.

vocabulary lists. Students who are working beyond the third level often have very different backgrounds, skill sets, and goals, and I have encouraged them to develop a personal learning plan rather than presenting them with a pre-determined curriculum so that they have a program specifically designed for them and also so that they develop some experience designing a personal learning program – see the German 4 curriculum on the online website under 'German Courses – past and present'.

-- An Internet connection such as Skype that allows instantaneous audio communication and also payment of the lesson costs through PayPal for international payments.

-- It is obviously essential that the instructor know and understand the online materials very well so that he/she can direct the student to the materials that will be most helpful for that student.

The Tutoring Process
When I first contact a new student, I interview the student either in person or via Skype to determine what the student's language training has consisted of, what the student's learning goals are, and how much time the student can devote to studying; this interview may be entirely in English initially or mostly in German. During the initial contact period, I will use a one- to two-page written placement test at approximately the level the student has described - that is available with the online materials - and I will also then interview the student in the language at that level to listen for pronunciation and syntax errors and to determine when the student begins to have problems formulating the language material.
The written exam used during the initial contact is one of the elements used to determine the proper placement of the prospective student in the online materials; it presents one or two grammatical questions from each of the major topics covered in the previous level of instruction (equivalent to the one year of high school language instruction in my case). The same exam is also used for students who complete a level of instruction and intend to continue to the next level of instruction to diagnose areas of the completed instructional level that the student has not yet mastered sufficiently well. When I was teaching full-time, I used this exam at the start of each new school year to determine review materials needed by each individual student and assigned a personalized set of computer practice programs for each student. With tutored students the exam is used at the end of a level of instruction to verify that the student has mastered the materials needed to be successful at the next level of instruction. If there are areas of weakness, these will be reviewed as part of the initial lessons in the next level and an individualized review is developed for each student.

Once the student's goals and placement have been determined, a lesson schedule and the lesson length are mutually agreed upon and the first lesson is scheduled. At this point it is critical that the instructor be extremely familiar with the online materials in order to be able to select those items that will most benefit the student. If the student has pronunciation problems, for example, then the student will be directed to several items in

the initial lessons of the first level that provide information and practice in the proper pronunciation of the language; in one case, I provided specially created, contrastive pronunciation practice. If the student understands some of the concepts in a particular lesson, but not everything, then only those items will be suggested for study and review. One of the big differences between teaching a class and tutoring is that the class curriculum is often pre-determined and the instructor has to cover this material whereas for tutoring the teacher needs to consider the goals and desires of the student, the existing language skills of that student, and that student's progress toward his or her goals. A second difference is that grades are normally required as part of a class design, whereas competency is the goal of a tutorial program, although grades on tests and the computer practice exercises may act as an incentive. If the goals of the student sometimes seem too limited to the teacher or if the student is not progressing as rapidly toward one or more of the student's goals, the instructor may want to suggest additional or alternative activities or procedures to help the student as I did in the example below:

A goal of one student was to be able to read fluently and she needed to expand her vocabulary to do that. After six months of intensive work including a good amount of reading, she indicated in a review of her goals and progress that her reading skill was not improving very rapidly. She had found that she was having difficulty progressing to new reading material because she did not know enough of the new words. Initially, I had suggested to her that she should study the vocabulary lists that are part of each syllabus and could work with the various computer-based vocabulary practice lessons as part of her work on each syllabus. [*These vocabulary lists and the associated computer practice programs are comprised of words selected for the frequency of use with the most frequent words presented in Level 1 and the next most frequent set of words in Level 2 and so forth. The 2500+ words presented through the four levels probably comprise 80% to 90% of the commonly seen vocabulary; knowledge of these words would improve her reading level.*] She had not consistently worked to learn the regularly occurring new vocabulary well which would have happened if she had worked with new word lists and the computer practice programs and reported scores on these programs to the instructor. After her interim review she did begin to use the computer practice programs and was consistently learning and using new vocabulary. This same student wanted to be able to write and speak reasonably fluently, and also completed intensive work with the grammar materials, but she had had some previous language exposure before she began to work with me and at that time she had not paid particular attention to learning the articles/gender of the individual words which is quite important for the German language and several other commonly studied world languages. After her interim review, in addition to learning and practicing new vocabulary at Level 3 with the computer programs, she reviewed the vocabulary at Levels 1 and 2 with the online computer programs to practice and learn the associated articles.

In my experience most serious students seeking tutoring want to improve their understanding and use of the grammar of the language being studied so that they can read and speak more fluently. In preparation for a Skype lesson, the instructor selects appropriate grammar topics from the lesson under study and has the student read the explanatory material and work through one or more of the written exercises and check

his/her answers with the answers provided. Excellent additional practice is also available through the java-based 'Grammar and Vocabulary practice exercises'. For many of the major grammar topics these computer-based practice exercises provide more than one exercise on a topic and these exercises are sequenced so that the later exercises on the topic become more difficult; it is important to note that the vocabulary used in the computer exercises is always drawn from vocabulary that the students have learned through the vocabulary units up to that point.

Sometimes the student has questions or requests further explanation of the assigned material during the succeeding Skype session. In some cases the student's questions stem from a lack of understanding of the meta-terminology used in the explanations (whether these are in the language under study or in English). Therefore, many of the lessons also refer to chapters in a book on English grammar (see online FLI German 1, Aufgabe 1 for a reference) to provide further support for understanding the new grammar elements. Additional practice with the new grammar topics is often also done during the Skype lessons.

The development of the student's speaking skill is usually an important student goal. Since it is important to me that my students feel comfortable and understand well, I work to develop the student's speaking skill through a gradual movement from the use of English to German. I have found that students who have learned new vocabulary (including the noun genders and the verb conjugations) and grammar well through the use of the online materials consistently improve their speaking and understanding of the new language because they understand how sentences are constructed and they have the tools to put new sentences together. Although I feel that students progress most effectively if they learn in the manner outlined above, not all the students whom I tutor are inclined to work in this way. I am currently also working with a student who has as his major goal the improvement of his speaking ability. I believe he does not want to work with the java-based material because several levels of the programs require great accuracy with the written aspect of the language, and his goal is not to develop good writing skills. As a result he and I do continual oral review of grammar elements that he uses incorrectly in his spoken work with me. He is learning and improving, but it is a more gradual process.

For tutored students with little or no previous background or for those who have pronunciation errors, the early Skype sessions deal with how to make certain new sounds and how to read various letter combinations with the proper pronunciation. The next stage is to practice the various sentence/question structures that the students have learned early in the first level. This often takes the form of the instructor asking the student questions in German during the initial part of the lesson about the student's activities. The students have also obtained a beginning reader with very short and nicely illustrated stories that provide new vocabulary and a set of short factual questions on each story. These are also used during the Skype lessons to elicit practice speaking by the student. Somewhat longer and more detailed reading pieces are provided in the online lessons toward the end of the first level. The book that students use in the second level for reading and speaking practice is constructed to provide gradually more complex and longer material. With tutored students I ask questions about the stories read and then introduce the concept of retelling a story (defined in detail online in Level 2) where the student prepares notes on one of the stories and then tells that story in his/her own words.

By the time students reach the third level the explanatory material from here on is almost entirely in German and the entire Skype lessons are conducted in the language. Reading selections are usually based on material of interest to the student and still provide a solid basis for retelling; but now the retelling is usually many minutes in length rather than one or two minutes as in Level 2. Speaking now also focuses a great deal on the activities of the student and at the same time new vocabulary, complex and varied sentence structure, use of past and future tenses for relating events in the student's life are encouraged. As the student progresses through Level 3 into Level 4, the focus of the language program gradually shifts from learning elements of the language to using the language in various ways. In contrast to the Level 3 program where the curriculum is well defined, the Level 4 student is strongly encouraged to begin to design an individualized learning program rather than relying on the instructor to lay out what the student should be learning. This new curriculum design is in keeping with my philosophy that the student should be given some experience in planning a personal learning plan as a way to encourage life-long-learning.

When students begin to design their own curriculum, then one can no longer have a coherent, single-curriculum class. Thus the <u>multi-level class</u> was a fact of the instructional program during the latter years of my full-time teaching career. This was a class in which students were no longer at the same place in the curriculum or indeed had different learning programs. The use of technology was an integral part of the program and that allowed many students to work independently of the teacher.

How do the procedures outlined above relate to elements of several learning standards that have been developed in recent years? Below I will talk about aspects of three standards and how the individualized, differentiated, and personalized tutorial program typifies these standards.

<u>Standards and an **individualized, differentiated,** and **personalized** tutorial program</u>

As used in <u>the National Education Technology Plan 2010</u> these three terms have specialized meanings that apply directly to students working in my tutorial program:

> *"**Individualization** refers to instruction that is paced to the learning needs of different learners. Learning goals are the same for all students, but students can progress through the material at different speeds according to their learning needs."*

> This is true for the first three levels of the online curriculum where there are defined syllabi and all students are expected to master the material. However, in a tutorial program the speed with which one progresses through the material depends on several student factors: how well the student understand the new material, how much time the student spends preparing the new material, and how carefully the student works.

> *"**Differentiation** refers to instruction that is tailored to the learning preferences of different learners. Learning goals are the same for all students, but the method or*

approach of instruction varies according to the preferences of each student or what research has found works best for students like them."

In my case with recent students I had one student who would use all the materials available to learn the grammar and vocabulary. While at the same time I had another student who did not want to use the computer-based practice materials to learn the same concepts.

*"**Personalization** refers to instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners. In an environment that is fully personalized, the learning objectives and content as well as the method and pace may all vary (so personalization encompasses differentiation and individualization)." (NETP 2010, p. 12)*

One of the initial steps I use with new students is to determine the student's goals. So if one student wants to prepare for a highly specialized reading exam, then the student will indeed learn the grammar and vocabulary and practice speaking and listening, but the emphasis will be on developing reading skills. If, on the other hand, the student wants to emphasis speaking skills, then more activities will be focused on using the new material in spoken scenarios, while still allowing for personalization and differentiation. In one of my last years as a full-time teacher I had a fourth-year student who wanted to focus on writing. So her self-made learning plan included a large emphasis on writing and throughout the year she wrote a chapters in an original mystery story that was so engrossing that I looked forward to each next chapter with great anticipation.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy

With the attention to individual needs that this personalized tutorial program provides, the 'Language Progressive Skills' described in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts are automatically and continually considered in carrying out the tutorial program. [See the complete chart page 30 of the full paper].

The following list of items are quoted from the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy, but they are just as appropriate for world language learners:

"Language Progressive Skills, by Grade
The following skills, marked with an asterisk (*) in Language standards 1–3 [*see originals*], are particularly likely to require continued attention in higher grades as they are applied to increasingly sophisticated writing and speaking.

L.3.1f. Ensure subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement.
L.3.3a. Choose words and phrases for effect.

L.4.1f. Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons.
L.4.1g. Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., *to/too/two; there/their*).
L.4.3a. Choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely.
L.4.3b. Choose punctuation for effect.
L.5.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb tense.
L.5.2a. Use punctuation to separate items in a series.
L.6.1c. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in pronoun number and person.
L.6.1d. Recognize and correct vague pronouns (i.e., ones with unclear or ambiguous antecedents).
L.6.1e. Recognize variations from standard English in their own and others' writing and speaking, and identify and use strategies to improve expression in conventional language.
L.6.2a. Use punctuation (commas, parentheses, dashes) to set off nonrestrictive/parenthetical elements.
L.6.3a. Vary sentence patterns for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style.
L.6.3b. Maintain consistency in style and tone.
L.7.1c. Place phrases and clauses within a sentence, recognizing and correcting misplaced and dangling modifiers.
L.7.3a. Choose language that expresses ideas precisely and concisely, recognizing and eliminating wordiness and redundancy.
L.8.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb voice and mood.
L.9–10.1a. Use parallel structure." (Common Core State Standards p. 30)

International Society for Technology in Education - Standards – 2007

In 2007 the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) published the second edition of the National Technology Education Standards for Students (NETS-S) in which students are expected to employ technology to produce products and results. This new version of NETS-S emphasizes how to employ technology to learn new information, evaluate data, or produce some product. These important skills for students who intend to be effective learners through the online instructional program are quoted in the chart below from the ISTE summary article.
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"Iste.nets-s – Advancing Digital Age Learning
    1 Creativity and Innovation
        Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge, and develop innovative products and processes using technology.
        …
    2 Communication and Collaboration
        Students use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning and contribute to the learning of others.
        …
    3 Research and Information Fluency

Students apply digital tools to gather, evaluate, and use information.
…

4 Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Decision Making
Students use critical thinking skills to plan and conduct research, manage projects, solve problems, and make informed decisions using appropriate digital tools and resources.
…
5 Digital Citizenship
Students understand human, cultural, and societal issues related to technology and practice legal and ethical behavior.
…
6 Technology Operations and Concepts
Students demonstrate a sound understanding of technology concepts, systems, and operations.
…"
(Pages 1 and 2 from the summary)

National Education Technology Plan – 2010

Another important plan of action that was mentioned above is the long-range plan for the use of technology in education as described in the National Education Technology Plan – 2010. In this plan several concepts are mentioned that apply directly to a 'personalized' tutorial program:

Same lesson for all
"…In a time when we have the capability to support learning 24/7 and personalize the way a student interacts with digital content, it no longer makes sense to give every 13-year-old the same set of 45-minute American history lessons." (NETP p. 68)

Through tutoring via Skype with online materials, one can indeed support 24/7 learning and personalize the instruction to fit the needs of the tutee.
A multi-level class also allows for personalized instruction.

Time-based or seat-time measures of educational attainment
"Time-based measures were appropriate in their day, but they are not now when we know more about how people learn and we have access to technology that can help us accommodate different styles and paces of learning. As we move to online learning and learning that combines classroom and online learning, time-based measures will increasingly frustrate our attempts to provide learning experiences that lead to achievement and the pursuit of postsecondary education that our modern world requires." (NETP p. 68)

If the class is time constrained, then in multi-level classes where technology is abundantly available, students can be allowed and encouraged to achieve more if they have already mastered the 'required' course work and given extra credit for that work, i.e. such as doing substantially more work to prepare for the AP exam in German. In the tutorial program described here, completion and mastery of the course work is the goal and is not limited by 'time-based' measures.

Same classroom for a year

"Another basic assumption is the inflexible way we organize students into age-determined groups, structure separate academic disciplines, organize learning into classes of roughly equal size with all the students in a particular class receiving the same content at the same pace, and keep these groups in place all year." (NETP p.68-69)

This assumption does not apply to a tutorial program where one sees students individually. Even in multi-level classes as I had, I did have the same students for the same time period, but composition of the class was not age-determined, the content and pacing of the class was quite different for many students.

Online Learning

"…Our education system should leverage students' interest in technology and the time they currently spend learning informally outside the regular school hours to extend learning time in a way that motivates them even more.

One way to do that is through online learning, which allows schools to extend learning time by providing students with learning on demand anytime and anywhere, dramatically expanding educational opportunities without increasing time spent in school.…" (NETP p. 71)

This concept is the heart of a successful 24/7 online tutorial program as described in this paper. This very idea was even proposed over 15 years ago in "The Future of German in American Education - Summary Report, July 1996" which delineates quite clearly how the use of technology in language instruction can greatly modify the structure of the course and even support courses where there otherwise might not be any:

"Consider technology not merely as an optional add-on but as potentially reshaping the entire language learning construct (e.g., individualized, student-centered learning, access to on-line information, task-based learning, linked learning with native speakers of German, distance learning in areas where German programs can otherwise not be supported, language maintenance, specialized programs)" (Byrnes, 1996, p. 6).

"…Exploit the Flexibility and Power of Technology…
*The always-on nature of the Internet and mobile access devices provides our
education system with the opportunity to create learning experiences that are
available anytime and anywhere…." (NETP p.23)*

> The personalized tutorial program is most effective in a 24/7 environment and
> through the Internet.

*"…Assuming that we have standards for the competencies students must have and
valid, reliable techniques for measuring these competencies, technology can help
us assess (and reward) learning regardless of when and where it takes place."
(NETP p. 28)*

> Particularly in a multi-level classroom technology can allow us to assess
> student progress and allow the student to progress when they have master and
> completed the course work whether the work was done in a classroom or in
> other places. For the tutorial program technology is essential for the progress
> of the student wherever he or she is.

*"There is a difference between using assessments to determine what students have
learned for grading and accountability purposes (summative uses) and using
assessments to diagnose and modify the conditions of learning and instruction
(formative uses)…." (NETP p. 28)*

> In the multi-level classroom the summative use of assessment is necessary to
> provide grades, but assessment through technology can also allow the student
> to see how well he/she is doing and often times continue to work with the new
> material and redo the assessment activity until the student obtains the level of
> achievement that he/she wishes. In the tutorial program assessment is mostly
> formative in nature.

*"3.3 Use technology to provide all learners with online access to effective
teaching and better learning opportunities and options in places where they are
not otherwise available and in blended (online and offline) learning
environments." (NETP p. 49)*

> As I mentioned at the start of the paper, I have been tutoring students in places
> where there was no course available, or the courses that were available were
> not appropriate for the student.

Last Words

In terms of providing tutorial instruction anytime and anywhere that is personalized to the
needs and goals of each student, an online tutorial program using Skype admirably meets
this expectation. However, such a program requires significant time for each student. At a
rate of one hour per student per week, a regular teacher could work with 25 to 30 students
per week. I do not believe that this would be practical for most situations, but my
experience during my last years as a full-time teacher and working through Skype and the
Internet since then indicates that many students can learn very well in an individualized,

differentiated, and personalized program with less concentrated time with a teacher. What I have described here is a way for students with an incomplete background in the language or students who wish to progress at their own pace to receive the specific materials and directions they need to learn well.

References:

"Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C., 2010)

"National Educational Technology Standards for Students", Second Edition (International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), 2007) – see: http://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/nets-s-standards.pdf?sfvrsn=2

"The Future of German in American Education - Summary Report, July 1996" (Byrnes, Heidi, Georgetown University, AATG Newsletter, Vol. 32, No.1 pp 4-8)

"Transforming American Education: Learning Powered by Technology" (National Education Technology Plan 2010, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, November, 2010)

Website for materials referred to in this paper: http://morreys-language.com