World Language Tutoring via Skype and Online Materials

Robert A. Morrey, Ph.D.
3404 Merrimac Drive
San Jose, CA 95117-3624
Telephone: (408) 379-5944
E-mail: rmorrey@pacbell.net
Web site: http://99.23.170.17/~ramorrey/

Overview
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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 the tutorial program is built upon procedures and materials I used on the Internet to teach high school students, I will also refer to some of this material and reference portions of three sets of standards, including the Common Core 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 in 2005 and one in 2003 that provide a much more detailed description of the use of an Internet-based instructional program for high school students; it is located at: http://99.23.169.128/~ramorrey/

<u>Background</u>
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, the 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 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. [show pictures of the 2002 classroom and supplemental written materials]

Other changes began to impact the German program in the late nineties and led to my retirement in 2001. The Eastern-Pacific student population of the school was increasing, and that led to the introduction of both Japanese and Chinese language classes at the school. Fewer students were entering the German program as these other languages grew in popularity. In addition, the California Digital High School program increased the emphasis on the use of technology, encouraged teachers to consider the concept of 'anytime/anywhere learning', and expanded the availability of Internet access. In January 2005, the National Education Technology Plan 2004 was introduced by the United States Department of Education and in 2010 the National Education Technology Plan 2010 was released; it also strongly encourages the migration of content to the Internet so that students will have continual access to it. Since students could already learn through a kind of anytime learning within the German classroom, a conversion of the in-class program to an Internet-based program was the way to continue to provide a part-time German program after June 2001. While an Internet-based, world language instructional program is probably not the most appropriate teaching method for all students, it does provide options for highly motivated and interested students that may otherwise not exist and it provides an excellent forum for tutoring students anywhere at anytime.

The following recommendation from "The Future of German in American Education - Summary Report, July 1996" 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).

<u>Components of an effective online tutorial program:</u>
   An online tutoring program consists of:

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

   -- A procedure to determine what the prospective student wants to learn and what
   that person's current ability with the language is, 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 three levels of the 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 are still new grammar explanations and coordinated
   computer practice programs and extensive 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 – see the German 4 curriculum on the online
   website under 'German Courses – past and present'.

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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.

-- It is therefore 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.

Application of these components to my situation

In my case, 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 interview the student in the language to listen for pronunciation and syntax errors and to determine at what level 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. The first exam, for example, covers material normally presented in the first level of instruction (equivalent to the first 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. At this point the same exam is used to diagnose areas of the completed instructional level that the student has not yet mastered sufficiently well. The student can then be directed to explanatory material from the previous level and encouraged to use the computer practice materials to review those specific topics. 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 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 even 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 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 on various areas of grammar, she indicated in a review of her goals and progress that her reading skill was not improving very rapidly and that she was probably not learning enough vocabulary. 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 that are referred to in each of the syllabi.
[*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 will 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 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 is now consistently learning and using new vocabulary. This same student also wanted to be able to write reasonably fluently, hence the 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. Now, in addition to learning and practicing new vocabulary at Level 3 with the computer programs, she is reviewing 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. The instructor selects appropriate grammar topics from the lessons and has the student read the explanatory material and work through one of the written exercises and check his/her answers with the answers provided in preparation for the next Skype lesson. Excellent additional practice is also available through the '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. In some cases, the student has questions or requests further explanation of the assigned material during the succeeding Skype session. Sometimes 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 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 the language under study. 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. 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 about his/her activities during the initial part of the lesson. The students have also purchased 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 the language under study 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 several 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.

Standards and an **individualized, differentiated,** and **personalized** tutorial program

As used in the National Education Technology Plan 2010 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.*
>
> ***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.*
>
> ***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)

With the attention to individual needs that this personalized tutorial program provides, the 'Language Progressive Skills' describe 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].

The following chart lists items that are in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, but they are just as appropriate for world language learners:

> **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy**
> "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)

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 [Show slide with the new standards 2007 NETS-S]. 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 listed in the chart below.

International Society for Technology in Education - Standards – 2007

1 Creativity and Innovation

Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge, and develop innovative products and processes using technology.

2 Communication and Elaboration

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

Another important plan of action that has been 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:

National Education Technology Plan – 2010
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)

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)

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.69)

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)

Exploit the Power and Flexibility 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)

"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)

"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)

"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)

Conclusion
In terms of providing tutorial instruction anytime and anywhere that is personalized to the needs and goals of each student, the 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://99.23.179.17/~ramorrey/