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Engaging Learners in Culturally Authentic Virtual Interactions

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Abstract

The new spaces and new realities of networked technologies provide learning opportunities that can engage and personalize the learning experience well beyond what traditional electronic learning content can offer. Language students can now engage in real-world conversations with native speakers in real time, enabling students to connect the learning content of the classroom to meaningful, applied experiences. This article describes a standards based approach to integrating language and culture in a natural, authentic context. It includes a rationale for establishing a virtual conversation program, a review of available technology tools, an overview of an existing program as well as a discussion of strategies for organizing and executing a successful program.

Introduction

According to a theory of second language acquisition purported by Long (1991), Firth and Wagner (2007) and Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) among others, languages are learned through social interaction. Interaction has become a common-place format for engaging students in world language classroom activities, increasing the amount of potential output of each student. It is through this interaction with others that students express thoughts, opinions and feelings and negotiate meaning with their peers and with native speakers (Pica, 1994; Long, 1981; Gass, 1997, Gass & Varonia 1994; Doughty 1998; Blake 2000, 2005).

When students are asked to communicate in a real-world situation in which they must negotiate meaning, they test new linguistic forms and terms, notice what they do not yet know how to express, and examine cultural nuances that can cause misinterpretations, especially when engaging with a native speaker (Blake 2013; Swain, 1985, 1995, 2000; Swain & Lapkin 1998). Learners have much to gain by engaging in target language interaction, both inside and outside the classroom, in order to increase production and improve proficiency.

In a perfect world, all world language students would be exposed to the target language and culture in an immersive experience with native speakers, preferably while studying abroad. However, although many study abroad programs exist, the reality is that few students can enroll in long or short term study abroad, often for financial issues, work responsibilities, family commitments, among other reasons (Institute of International Education, 2013).

The good news is that in today's technology-driven world, the means of communicating with others are becoming more sophisticated every day, facilitating virtual face-to-face interaction among individuals and groups. In fact, technology has moved well beyond traditional electronic course content in order to meet student demands for authentic interactive linguistic and cultural experiences. The new spaces and new realities of networked communication can provide interactive communication opportunities for students to engage in personalized and transformative learning experiences. For language learners, this means engagement in real-world conversations with native speakers in real time, connecting the learning content of the classroom to meaningful, applied experiences that encourage an examination of multiple realities. The benefits of students' interactions in virtual, synchronous communication have been cited by such researchers as Pellettieri (2000), Blake (2000), O'Dowd & Waire (2009) and Schenker (2014). According to Blake (2013), such virtual interactions have "…an enormous contribution to make to the L2 curriculum if teachers will become familiar enough with the technology to be able to incorporate it into the students' out-of-class assignments" (p. 17). This article describes a standards-based approach to synchronous face-to-face interaction, integrating language and culture in a natural, authentic context. It includes a rationale for establishing a virtual interactive program, a review of available technology tools, an overview of an existing program, and a discussion of strategies for planning and executing a successful program. The transformative potential for students and instructors will also be discussed.

Program Rationale

The average student in the United States begins world language studies as an adolescent or adult learner (ACTFL, 2008) when the stakes are higher for the time intensive goals of proficiency. The Foreign Service Institute estimated in 1994 that between 700-1320 hours of intense instruction are required to reach a high level of fluency in a second language (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994). However, the average college student studying a Romance language spends approximately three hours a week in class for 30 weeks for a total of 90 hours per academic year studying

a second language (Heining-Boynton, 2010). Even for some students who begin their language studies in high school and continue at the university level, any advantage is often lost, as students are placed in lower or intermediate level courses which typically do little more than review the content of their high school studies. In addition, these courses may utilize the same or very similar teaching materials, such as publisher prepared textbook and online workbook materials. While some universities grapple with the questions of how to place students and motivate them to continue in world language programs, the fact remains that the time factor continues to work against educators in the quest for meeting proficiency objectives. Disillusioned students may voice the all-too-common concern that they have studied a language for a specific number of years and still cannot communicate.

Faced with such a situation, what alternatives exist for world language educators to enhance learning, boost proficiency and speed up the rate of acquisition? In addition to taking into account SLA theory and applying best practices promoted by state and national organizations for world language education, world language instructors can leverage technology to provide the necessary interaction to enhance student proficiency through contact with native speakers of the target language. A virtual, synchronous interactive program can integrate the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (NSFLEP, 2014) in deliberate and meaningful ways. The five goal areas of the standards serve as the guiding principles of curriculum and course design: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons and communities. The communication standard is clearly addressed through the virtual, interactive environment, due to the fact that synchronous interaction provides an authentic setting in which students communicate in the target language. The cultures standard can be integrated if opportunities are provided for conversation pertaining to products and practices. In class follow-up discussion could focus on the perspectives behind these cultural norms. In addition, students can be guided to make comparisons of their own culture to the culture of their virtual partner in order to address the comparisons standard. The digital environment creates global interaction that can potentially utilize other disciplines as the context for discussions and interactive tasks, thus addressing the connections standard. The communities standard, the culmination of language learning goals, is clearly addressed by giving students the opportunity to use the language outside the classroom setting. Thus, students are encouraged to make the connection between what they do in the language classroom and what they want to do outside of class, professionally and personally. Students can be trained to apply technology and to utilize their second language competence in virtual environments for personal enrichment or professional activities in the future.

Current best practices point to the integration of culture in target language activities and tasks in order to provide a context and a real-life purpose for language learning (Allen, 2014; Clementi & Terrill, 2013). World language educators strive to prepare students as global citizens in an ever-changing, multi-cultural society, recognizing that it is through language study that students begin to examine

their world through another culture's perspective (ACTFL, 2014; Andrew, 2013; Sinicrope, C., Norris, J. & Watanabe, Y., 2007). Allen (2014) has referred to the term intercultural competence as it relates to language learning, defined as "…the ability to interact with others, to understand other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives and to be conscious of one's own and others' evaluations of difference" (p.27). Michael Byram (1997) took this concept one step further when he coined the term intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Students with intercultural communicative competence are:

> …able to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. They are able to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction which is satisfactory to themselves and the other and they are able to act as mediator between people of different cultural origins. Their knowledge of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately-- sociolinguistic and discourse competence--and their awareness of the specific meanings, values and connotations of the language. They also have a basis for acquiring new languages and cultural understandings as a consequence of the skills they have acquired in the first. (p. 71)

Course content that directly connects students to the language and culture in the world outside the classroom addresses goals of intercultural communicative competence. As world language educators contend with how to provide such experiences in a real life context, the digital world offers opportunities that traditionally could only be possible through a study abroad program with deliberately planned experiences to interact with native speakers.

Increasing the opportunities for student interaction is a common goal in today's world language classrooms (Hall, 1995, 2001; Muldrow, 2014; Phillips, 2009). According to Kern and Warschauer (2000), "The focus of instruction has broadened from the teaching of discrete grammatical structures to the fostering of communicative ability. Negotiation of meaning has come to take precedence over structural drill practice" (p. 1). Although proficiency is modeled, teacher-fronted class sessions offer limited opportunities for students to speak in the target language. For instance, if a class meets two to three times a week for 50 minutes, with 20-30 students enrolled in the class, the teacher could at best provide the average student one to two opportunities to respond in the target language during each class session. The topic of the exchange and the context are generalized for the entire class. Cultural information is presented by the instructor and through course materials. Student-to-student interaction is a common activity design in today's world language classrooms. Although the output of students during partner interaction increases overall production, student partners are typically both novice to intermediate speakers, so there is no interaction with a native speaker and little to no cultural information is exchanged. Finally, virtual conversations with native speakers offer increased output per session, the opportunity to model native speaker proficiency, and the exchange of authentic cultural information.

Program Options

Several virtual conversation service options which particularly align with academic settings are currently available. The instructor and program coordinator have numerous issues to consider when exploring options for specific programs, courses and student populations, such as cost, time differences, calendar of classes, type of linguistic experience, type of facilitators, setting, student population, ease of organization, accountability and required equipment. Table 1 on the next page describes the advantages and disadvantages of five available service options.

Language Twin

Language Twin offers a platform for university students of Spanish or English to conduct conversations with native speaker peers outside of class, anytime and anyplace where Internet is available. To commence a session, students login to the company website where they can search the list of peers or 'twins' currently available and online. 'Twins' are listed by name, with additional information posted including country of origin, age, university, photo, and interests and pastimes. Students can choose to initiate a conversation with one of the 'twins' currently online by clicking on the name of the person and inviting him/her to talk in a chat box. If the twin accepts the invitation, students add the twin to their contacts. The twin clicks accept and they are connected. Students can also contact a peer through a list of contacts, similar to other online video software. Another option for connecting with a peer is through quick chat. Students click the quick chat button and the software searches for a twin according to language specifications previously defined in an initial questionnaire for each student. The software will then alert the student when a match has been found. The student has the option to reject or accept a pairing. Students can then choose a language and click record. The software only allows students to record sessions of their own language of study. To switch languages, the student stops recording and asks his/her twin to begin recording. Students choose the length and number of conversations. The software also contains 600 icebreaker questions in case students need assistance with topics to discuss. Students can complete assignments from instructors that have been previously uploaded through the instructor's account page. Instructors have the option to check their page to track student participation and to view students' recorded sessions. Students need a computer, webcam, microphone and Internet connection.

Talk Abroad

Real time conversations of 30 minutes in length are offered in Spanish, French, English and Chinese through this online company. Conversation partners are trained and supervised through the company and utilize video conferencing software as the interface for the conversations. Students need a computer, web access, a headset and microphone. Learners read about the partners and choose one based on interests or a course assignment. They can coordinate and schedule their sessions according to individual circumstances. Both students and instructors

Table 1. Options for Virtual Interaction

Name of Service	Cost	Type of program	Languages offered	Integration of course content	Student population	Accountability	Number of sessions per week
Language Twin	Individual License: $35 per term, $55 per year; sliding scale for bulk licenses	Dual immersion, student to student	Spanish, English	Instructor uploads assignment to website	University level only	Students can record their sessions. Software tracks dates and length of each session.	unlimited
Talk Abroad	Per conversation cost for students: 1 = $15, 2 = $30, 3 = $40, 4 = $45, 5+ = $10 per conversation	Immersion with Trained and supervised conversation partners	Spanish, French, English and Chinese	Instructor provides instructions to conversation partner	High School and University level	Sessions are recorded for instructors and students to listen to entire recording if desired.	One 30 minute session per week; number of sessions depends upon price paid.
LinguaMeeting	University students: 6 sessions=$30 12 sessions=$52 per semester High school students: 15 sessions=$79 per academic year	Immersion with a trained language coach	Spanish, French	Coaches provide conversational practice in small groups.	High School and University level	Sessions are recorded for instructors. Students are graded each week on attendance and participation. This includes a short performance description.	One 30 minute session per week for 6 or 12 weeks.
WeSpeke	Free	Dual immersion, student to student	103 languages	Teachers may set up exchange sessions. Lesson plans are provided.	Individual, middle, high school and university		Unlimited access
Independent	Free	Dual immersion, student to student	Any language	Instructors define format, usually 2:1 student peers	High School and University Level	Sessions could be recorded using digital media software.	According to course assignments and/or instructor arrangements

may listen to a recording of each conversation. Talk Abroad also possesses a social mission which aims to provide fair wages and work that is flexible and reliable for trained conversation employees in over 15 developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Linguameeting

Linguameeting offers virtual conversational practice with a native speaker language coach. Students participate via virtual meeting software in small 30-minute group sessions related to the material covered in their Spanish courses. Students need a webcam, microphone, internet connection and a computer to participate. Sessions are tracked and recorded, and students receive a grade for attendance and participation effort from their language coach. Language coaches reinforce material from class sessions while offering opportunities to communicate in Spanish or French. Coaches are primarily from Guatemala, Spain and France.

WeSpeke

WeSpeke is an online social network communication platform offering free access to individuals or school groups to engage in one on one interactive language practice. Communication takes place via text, audio or video, allowing interaction anytime and anyplace. Currently the company offers practice in 103 languages in 160 countries. Students create a profile and the software can display partner matches based on interests, language, and age. Students can see which matches are online and use a chat function to invite potential partners to converse. Learners can choose audio and video buttons to interact further or a disconnect button to end an unwanted interaction. For users' safety, the company offers community guidelines, a means to report abuse, and age appropriate pairings for students under age 18. WeSpeke encourages students to get the edge in preparation for study abroad experiences and job opportunities by communicating with native speakers prior to their travel and internships. Built-in language tools offer learner support and teachers may utilize the lesson plans on the website to integrate conversations into school curriculum.

Independent Partnerships

World language educators may arrange a partnership with a colleague abroad in order to offer interaction opportunities to their students. Several online resources offer educators a portal for arranging participation in native and target language exchanges. The advantages of one-on-one partnerships involve the freedom to negotiate the parameters of the exchange, including objectives, student preparation, guidelines and assessment. The disadvantages may include maneuvering the time differences, technology platforms and basic structure without the support of independent service providers for students and educators.

Program Implementation

The remainder of this article describes program implementation utilizing *Linguameeting* at one Midwestern university. Specifically, the reader will find a

complete overview of the program and a description of its components, including the purpose of the language coach, syllabus design and student preparation, the three modes of communication and communicative tasks, cultural integration, and assessment. Finally, a review of student perspectives will shed light on the transformative potential of implementing a similar program, both for students and instructors. Although *Linguameeting* was utilized for the program described in this article, it is expected that a similar implementation process would take place with any of the synchronous video options outlined previously, in accordance with the particular idiosyncrasies of each option. *Linguameeting* was selected based on the structure of the program, the manner in which the language coaches integrate and reinforce course content and the provisions for student accountability. *Linguameeting* offers language coaching to beginning and intermediate level students, utilizing well-known virtual meeting software to conduct sessions with a maximum of 3-4 students.

What is a language coach?

A language coach is not a tutor, but rather a guide or trainer who makes decisions about how the player or student performs. These decisions drive instructional activities and strategies utilized by the coach. A language coach does not explain grammar or conduct mechanical practice with the students. Instead, a context is introduced based on course calendar and content. Culture becomes a part of the context as the coach relates course content to the practices, products and perspectives of his/her country. Students answer questions posed by the language coach, ask each other questions as directed by the coach, and interact in a positive, non-threatening environment. Beginning students are not expected to communicate online solely with another student. They have the support of the language coach, who acts as the expert, guiding them in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) as they attempt to communicate in the target language.

Syllabus Design and Student Preparation for Sessions

The *Linguameeting* coaching program was implemented first with two sections of Spanish 101 as a pilot project to determine ease of functionality and level of success for students. Following the pilot, the coaching program was added to the Spanish 102 course during the next semester and to Spanish 201 Intermediate I the third semester. The project coordinator revised the course syllabi to integrate the coaching program into the course calendar of activities, while continuing to follow the organization of the beginning textbook utilized in a multi-section program. This integration was deemed an essential component of the organizational process in order that students consider the additional coaching requirement to be an important element of the course and not just an add-on. Therefore, the schedule and assignments to prepare for each session were built in and part of the overall course syllabus. A sample of the syllabus can be viewed in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample Partial Syllabus

SEMANA 6	Clase	Coaching
	CAPÍTULO TRES	*Prepárate:*
	- *Así es mi familia: la familia, los parientes y los amigos.* - *Tener y tener… años.* - Descriptive adjectives with *ser*: *los opuestos.*	*Para comenzar y Resumen de gramática* **Materiales: Fotos de tu familia**
SEMANA 7	**CAPÍTULO TRES**	
	- *Relaciones personales.* - Possessive adjectives and possession with *de* - *Estar* + location and condition: *¿Dónde están?/¿Cómo están?* - *Cultura: la familia hispana*	*Prepárate:* *La lengua en vivo* **Materiales: Fotos de tu familia**
SEMANA 8	**Repaso Capítulos 1-3** **CAPÍTULO CUATRO**	*Prepárate:*
	- *¡A la mesa! Vocabulario.* - The verb *gustar.*	*La cultura en vivo: págs. 99 A, B* *Repasar Capítulos 1-3*

In order to orient students to the logistical aspects of the program, they received an online memo regarding the steps to register for the 12 sessions of language coaching. Instructors reviewed registration steps with students during the first week of classes. After logging into the website and purchasing the code, students created a profile. Students chose a day and time that fit their schedule in order to begin coaching during the second week of classes. *Linguameeting* sent reminders to students prior to each coaching session with a link that led them directly to their session at the arranged day and time. Once students created a profile, they could use their username and password to manage their profile, change coaching days and times according to their weekly schedule, update their password and check on their attendance and progress.

The program coordinator and instructors utilized numerous techniques to prepare students for their first coaching sessions. Before the first coaching session, instructors showed a short video with the coach introducing herself and posted the coach's photo and biography on the learning management system so that students could feel less intimidated by becoming more familiar with their coach. Prior to the commencement of the program, the coordinator and the head coach developed the following session guidelines for students during coaching sessions. (See Table 3 on the next page.)

Table 3. Session Guidelines

Session Guidelines:
1.   Make sure to use your headset/earphones during sessions, as this reduces feed-back and echoes.
2.   Be punctual, as repeated tardiness will be reported and it may affect your final grade.
3.   Be prepared for your session. For instance, if you are to provide a photo to dis-cuss, be sure it is on your computer and ready to share.
4.   No cell phone use during the sessions.
5.   Do not wear hats, as it is important for your language coach to see your facial expressions.
6.   Choose a place that is quiet and does not have too many distractions, such as roommates, children and pets. If you are on campus, perhaps a study cubicle or room would work well.
7.   Relax, drink a cup of coffee or your favorite beverage and have fun! We want you to enjoy your sessions.

In addition, instructors reviewed the technology requirements with students, specific to their university. Students viewed a how-to video, which explained the steps to test equipment and login to their session at the appointed time. Instructors explained that students should review any content from previous class sessions prior to the coaching for optimal results. Instructors also emphasized the benefits of participating in additional practice with a trained coach and the positive potential outcome. They placed emphasis on the increased abilities to communicate in the language and the attendance requirement. Students practiced with their instructors a simulated coaching session as a class communication activity during the first week of classes.

Incorporating the Three Modes of Communication

Maximizing communication opportunities by instituting the coaching program into course content required deliberate integration of the three modes of communication (Phillips, 2008). Tasks and activities conducted during coaching and in class as follow-up activities incorporate interpersonal, interpretive and presentational modes of communication.

Communication Tasks and Activities

During coaching sessions, students utilized a table to compile information based on coach and peer responses. Each table pertained to a chapter theme of the textbook, such as shopping, food, favorite pastimes, university life and health. (See Table 4 for an example.) Instructors conducted in class follow-up activities based on the table. Students could be paired to discuss their findings with a partner. By projecting the table onto a screen during class, the instructor could then ask target language follow-up questions that were open-ended, such as *¿Qué aprendiste de tu guía de conversación*

*esta semana? [*What did you learn from your coach this week?] *¿Qué dice tu guía de conversación sobre* _____ *en Guatemala? [*What does your coach say about _____ in Guatemala?] *¿Qué dicen tus compañeros/as? [*What do your peers say?] These open ended questions required students to create their own output, and were void of specific linguistic information necessary for students to create their responses. Students who experienced instructor follow-up during class regarding coaching session content were more likely to have high attendance records for both class and coaching sessions.

Table 4. Coaching Session Sample *La comida*

	Yo [I]	*El/la instructor/a* []Instructor]	*Mi compañero/a* [Classmate]	*Mi compañero/a* [Classmate]
Desayuno típico [Typical Breakfast]				
Horario de las tres comidas [Schedule of Three Basic Meals]				
Alimentos típicos [Typical Foods]				
Las compras [Shopping]				
Cena típica [Typical Dinner]				
Restaurante preferido [Preferred Restaurant]				

Once beginning students learned how to formulate questions of their own, instructors included an investigative task that involved preparing questions to pose to their language coach. Instructor follow-up was a crucial part of this activity, which required students to share with a partner their findings regarding their language coach and report to the class. This report inevitably led to a brief discussion regarding comparisons of common practices and products. The example below is one such investigative task.

Una conversación con Ingrid

Nombre: *Ingrid Rocio* Méndez *Yancoba   Edad: 20 años(Photo of Ingrid here)*

Sus características personales son: *una persona amigable y alegre, le gusta conocer a nuevos amigos y lugares de interés, bailar, cantar, jugar, hablar de temas agradables, entre otras cosas.*

Sus aspiraciones son: *Tener una formación académica universitaria, especializada en educación y enseñanza del idioma español. Con este deseo tener una mejor oportunidad de vida en la sociedad, me gustaría conocer lugares bonitos donde se encuentre mucha naturaleza y lugares históricos.*

Motivaciones: *Formarme como Maestra de Español y ser parte del programa.*

Preguntas para Ingrid:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

[A conversation with Ingrid

Name: Ingrid Rocío Méndez Yancoba Age: 20 years old   (Photo of Ingrid here)

Her characteristics are: a friendly, happy person who likes to meet new friends, get to know new places, dance, sing, play, talk about nice themes, among other things.

Her aspirations are: Obtain university academic preparation, specializing in second language education. With this wish to have the best opportunity of life in society, I would like to see new and beautiful places where one can encounter a lot of natural and historical places.

Motivations: Become a Spanish teacher and be part of the program.

Questions for Ingrid:]

An additional activity involved written reflection. Students were required to keep a writing journal in the target language by responding to guided reflection questions. Questions facilitated an examination of products and practices, as well as the perspectives underlying each (Tang, 2006). For instance, questions prompted students to reflect upon and write about their university life experience and university life in the country of their language coach.

La vida universitaria en los Estados Unidos y en el país de tu guía de conversación

¿Cuántos estudiantes hay en una clase típica en tu universidad? ¿Es importante la participación en clase? ¿El/la profesor/a habla mucho en clase? ¿Cómo es la interacción entre profesor/a y estudiantes? ¿Es formal o informal? ¿Dónde viven los estudiantes? ¿Hay residencias en la universidad? ¿Los estudiantes seleccionan sus clases? Comenta sobre tu situación y la vida universitaria en el país de tu guía de conversación.

[University Life in the United States and in the Country of Your Language Coach

How many students are in a typical class at your university? Is class participation important? Does the professor talk a lot? What is the interaction like between professor and students? Is it formal or informal? Where do university students live? Are there dorms at your university? Do students choose their own classes? Comment on the situation at your university and at universities in the country of your language coach.]

Students made comparisons regarding cultural products, practices and perspectives. Although the student's responses are linguistically simple, cultural reflection is essential to complete the task. Task design, organization and structure are critical, given the potential transformative nature of virtual interactions, both in the areas of linguistic development and intercultural awareness (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009).

Cultural Integration

Language educators today agree that embedding culture into their language teaching is important (Byram, 2008; Byram, Nicholas & Stevens, 2001; Kramsch, 1993; Levy, 2007). In the coaching program, the coaches chose both still photos and live video as creative digital means of encouraging an examination of culture in the context of each session. Photos of their local surroundings were often utilized to present practices and products while simultaneously facilitating conversation. For example, a language coach uploaded a photo of a typical, colorful bus in Guatemala in order to prompt a discussion of the location of objects on and around the bus. In so doing she also highlighted the name, the colors, and overall appearance of the bus. The same coach uploaded a second photo of a motorcycle taxi typical of her town in Guatemala. She asked students simple questions to compare the type of taxis in their city in the United States with these small taxis in Guatemala, all while describing the location of people and items in the photo. A second coach invited students on a digital tour of her patio, achieved with the assistance of her laptop and webcam. Students met the coach's mother and toured her patio. They also experienced the contextualization of the grammar distinction of the verbs 'to know' in Spanish. A third group of students toured a Guatemalan outdoor market while their coach took her laptop along to do her local food shopping.

Assessment strategies

Formative assessment occurred throughout the semester as students received weekly attendance and participation grades and comments from their coaches. In addition, students participated in three recorded *charlas*, or live paired conversations, which were evaluated by their instructor utilizing a performance rubric. Students also participated in a final live paired interview at the end of the semester, evaluated based on the same performance rubric. This interview plus the three *charlas* forced language production and real-life language application to a higher level of importance for students, due to the implementation of these

evaluation tools. Additional assessments included a 5-minute presentation on a cultural comparison related to their coaching sessions and a written description of students' coach and peers from coaching sessions. Students viewed and evaluated their performance by watching recordings of coaching sessions. Finally, students prepared an audio or video speech sample of 1-2 minutes presenting interview results on a specific topic related to course content.

Student Comments

At the end of the semester, students completed an online survey regarding the coaching program. Their ratings were generally positive, as 77% of the 231 students who responded rated the program as satisfactory or very satisfactory, and 55.4% rated their coaching sessions as positively contributing to their overall speaking abilities in Spanish. Sample comments regarding the program include the following:

> "I thought that the experience was very good in helping me to apply Spanish to my everyday life and not just school related topics."

> "My coach kept the sessions fun and exciting. I looked forward to coming to the sessions!"

> "It's been very helpful to me because we can actually speak in a setting that you don't necessarily have to be right about what you are saying. much more interactive because it's 4:1 (student to teacher). i'm glad i actually did it [sic]."

> "Great program! It is very unique, and it helps a lot with building your Spanish communication skills."

> "Very good and easy way to continue to talk with a Spanish [sic] native speaker, greatly helps understand and talk in class."

> "It was an interesting experience and I enjoyed the different atmosphere of being able to talk to a native Spanish speaker."

> "I think this program is a good experience for students to know more about the hispanic [sic] culture and practice with communication."

> "It helped me develop my speaking and comprehension skills a lot because in class we do a lot of memorization and learning of terms and grammar, so I get to put that to use in the coaching program."

Some of the issues that the students raised as shortcomings of the program were connectivity, size of coaching groups, cost and need for further integration of coaching sessions into course content. Sample comments from students along these lines include the following:

"It is a good program just a few things that need to improve on like the connection."

"I really enjoy this program over all, I just was not happy with internet connect flaws

But I am glad I got the experience!"

"The technology broke many times. Things froze and were not fixed. 4 people plus a language coach is too many people in a group."

"I really enjoyed coaching. I do wish that we would refrence [sic] what we learned in the sessions in class more."

"I enjoyed the process of doing online coaching for the semester. The University's internet connection isn't the best so that was the only hassle."

"Overall, this program was okay. I did not like the cost of it. However, it did help my speaking"

"The price for the program is a bit high. If you could cut the costs, it would be much better."

Each of these areas of improvement outlined by the students can be addressed to enhance the experience for the learners in order to ensure continued positive outcomes. Instructors and program coordinators interested in creating a virtual interactive program can take note of these student observations as they begin the planning process.

Instructors' Perspectives

Implementing the language coaching program called for some unexpected professional development in several areas of methodology and best practices. The nature of the language coaching as an immersion program transformed instructors in significant ways, as it prompted some to update techniques and to increase their use of the target language in the classroom. Instructors held discussions regarding techniques and strategies for utilizing 90%+ of each class session in the target language, as well as appropriate tasks for fostering both student production and interaction in the target language (Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2014). The program coordinator showed sample recordings of pairs of students in order for instructors to understand the difference between a rehearsed and a more spontaneous, open-ended conversation. Instructors updated a rubric in order to assess student performance on two recorded student conversations during the semester. They also shared best practices for conducting contextualized communication tasks and revised departmental exams and quizzes to reflect the increased focus on comprehensible input and output.

An interesting element of discussion among colleagues was the status of dialectal correctness and opinions regarding the importance of presenting and practicing only textbook vocabulary versus the occasional terminology variations

produced by language coaches. Colleagues were challenged to come to terms with their concept of correct Spanish and the use of expressions and vocabulary that may be considered acceptable Spanish in one country and unacceptable in another. Since students experienced a focus on communication in the coaching sessions, instructors with a more traditional grammar approach began to examine the role and importance they placed on language production and proficiency, as well as the effect of the content of class sessions on student performance or preparedness for coaching sessions.

Lessons Learned

The virtual coaching program forced modifications in existing curricula and materials to meet new demands of our student population. According to Carel (2001), "…the value of educational research lies in what lessons we learn and how we apply them" (p. 158). In an attempt to relate this program to future contexts, I include the following six main points to consider.

1. Set realistic expectations. Start small by beginning with a pilot program and expand only after working through issues and obstacles observed during the trial period.
2. Explore new applications of technology. Today's educators are challenged to create innovative formats, models and structures for developing proficiency in the world language classroom and beyond.
3. Equip schools with the necessary technology to innovate. In the age of economic inconsistencies, educational funding constraints and demands for new means of generating revenue, administrators need to place devices in the hands of learners in order to effectively enhance learning.
4. Train instructors in the format first. For instructor buy-in and collegial support, allow colleagues to experience the new application well ahead of student integration. Instructor enthusiasm for innovation or lack thereof transfers to students.
5. Listen to students. Student feedback is essential in developing new learning contexts. Learners must play an active role in the construction of their educational realities.
6. Provide adequate follow-up tasks and assessments during class sessions. Students need to realize the relevance of the required activity through in-class engagement and evaluation tools.

Conclusion

Considering the potential linguistic and cultural value, synchronous interactive programs present a new format for supporting the learner and enhancing language acquisition. The particular program reviewed in this article provides standards-based virtual communication practice in a small group setting with native speaker instructors. Students interact utilizing all three modes of communication in an authentic, contextualized environment. The implementation of such a program offers the opportunity to take language learning beyond the classroom setting and

provides a framework for experiential learning and intercultural interaction in a virtual environment. Implementing such a program also creates transformational opportunities for world language instructors, as they reexamine components of best practices within new instructional contexts.

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