

Teaching Foreign Languages to Children Through Video

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The teaching of foreign languages at the elementary school level has changed immensely over the past two decades. Growing public awareness of the benefits of early foreign language learning has led to an increase in both foreign language teaching and professional development for language teachers at the elementary school level (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999). In 1996, the release of national standards for foreign language education had an extremely positive influence on K-12 foreign language teaching. State education agencies developed standards based on the national model, and school districts began to implement these standards at the local level.

This positive trend, however, has been jeopardized by a shortage of trained language teachers (Duncan, 2000b) and by budgetary constraints faced by schools and school districts. In addition, parents and educators are increasingly concerned about a lack of equity in elementary school language programs, which are viewed by some as special classes for a select group of students. School districts are now looking for ways to provide language classes for *all* students (Steele & Johnson, 2000).

Many administrators who are convinced of the importance of early foreign language education but who don't have the resources for foreign language classes taught by trained language teachers are looking for affordable alternatives. Programs that are delivered through technology and that do not require the use of a certified foreign language teacher offer a unique possibility. Such technology-delivered programs claim to be less expensive, easier to administer (Morris, 2000), and capable of reaching a wider audience than traditional language programs (Steele & Johnson, 2000). Thus, many educators are turning to technology as a way to offer foreign languages to young children.

This digest focuses on video-based language programs, a technology-delivered program model currently being used in many elementary schools in the United States.

Recent Research

In spite of the number of students learning foreign language by video, only a small number of video-based elementary school language programs have been formally evaluated, either by independent evaluators (Rosenbusch, García Villada, & Padgitt 2003) or by those affiliated with the program (Morris, 2000; Steele & Johnson, 2000). Two studies investigated the use of video-based language programs with rural elementary school students.

IN-VISION. The Iowa-Nebraska IN-VISION project aimed to demonstrate that technology provides an effective means to overcome the obstacles of cost, distance, and time that impede progress toward better foreign language education for rural children. The project established foreign language programs with the use of a children's Spanish video series (*SALSA*), Spanish-speaking teaching aides who teach a 20- to 30-minute Spanish class weekly, elementary classroom teachers who learn Spanish and integrate language and culture into their teaching of other disciplines, and other support materials. Results after the first year showed that students acquired basic Spanish listening and speaking skills. Most scores

on the *Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA)* were at the junior novice-mid level for listening comprehension (students understand predictable questions, statements, and commands in a familiar topic area, though at slower rates of speech) and the junior novice-low level for oral fluency (students produce isolated words and/or high frequency expressions). In addition, students developed a positive attitude toward Spanish and Hispanic cultures (Rosenbusch, García Villada, & Padgitt, 2003).

WyFLES. The second study, conducted in Wyoming, compared four models of delivery: 1) a video-based program (*SALSA*) used by the classroom teacher, 2) the *SALSA* program used by the classroom teacher with the help of Spanish-speaking volunteers, 3) the *SALSA* program used by the teacher and a trained Spanish-proficient paraprofessional working together as a team, and 4) a class taught by a trained elementary school Spanish teacher who may or may not have used the *SALSA* videos for enrichment. Although results are not yet available comparing student performance in the four models, the project director has evaluated the video program and found that the video series was unequaled in quality, but that the materials that accompanied the series were not adequate for a multi-year program (Tollefson, 2003). A teacher's guide and comprehensive supplementary materials for 18 of the 42 episodes were subsequently developed and piloted by project staff and are currently being used.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Instructional Videos

The use of instructional videos, like the use of any type of instructional method, has distinct advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages. Videos are a familiar medium that can be used effectively as a motivational tool (Instructional Television, 1995). Norum (1997) describes how video clips and other visuals can be shown to an entire class; she explains how actions and related vocabulary items, otherwise difficult or impossible to illustrate in a classroom setting, can be shown easily if recorded ahead of class time. Visual imagery may enhance student learning (Morris, 2000). Video clips, in particular, have been shown to be superior to still pictures or word definitions alone for vocabulary acquisition (Al-Seghayer, 2001). Duncan's (2000a) review of a live instructional Spanish television program in Massachusetts shows how language teachers' time can be maximized if they introduce material to many classes at once, via TV broadcasts, then follow up with regular instructional visits to all of the classrooms.

Disadvantages. Open-ended questions and information-gap activities, two techniques often used in traditional language classrooms to generate talk, may not produce the desired results in video-based instruction (Eyring, 2001). A strong argument made by opponents of any kind of distance learning, and one that could also apply to video-based instruction, is that it is an ineffective vehicle for foreign language instruction because it may limit interaction (Barty, 1998). Others suggest that most prepackaged instructional television courses use a mass media approach aimed at the average

student (Instructional Television, 1995). As a result, they can be ineffective in serving high- and low-achieving students.

Recommendations

Despite the paucity of research-based evidence, educators are clamoring for technological solutions to the demand for more language programs. Recent recommendations from leaders in the language profession, in the form of a white paper by NCSSFL (National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 2002), warn that foreign language educators “cannot afford to look solely to conventional solutions to overcome the shortage of resources and qualified teachers to realize its goals” and “must look to technology as one possible avenue for meeting the goals set forth in the national standards” (p. 1). NCSSFL does concede that distance learning, which they define as learning “when teachers and students are in different classrooms” (p. 1), may not be the most appropriate response to every problem, but that it should be considered as an option for school districts that have a limited number of qualified teachers, an interest in enriching a program by using the skills of a teacher at another site, a need to expand a program to include upper-level offerings, or a desire to reach areas with small numbers of potential foreign language learners.

Although focused on secondary school language teaching, NCSSFL’s recommendations may ring true for all levels of instruction. Their recommendations for distance learning apply just as well to video-based programs. They stress that, in order for distance learning to be a viable alternative to conventional classroom instruction, programs must “provide a mechanism for a major portion of class time to be devoted to meaningful language use and practice and to authentic communication” (National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 2002, p. 1).

The video program model that is often used—and that is most appealing to administrators—is one in which the classroom teacher, typically not a speaker of the foreign language, facilitates the program while learning the language along with the students. But the model that is most highly recommended by the foreign language teaching profession, concerned as it is with the goal of standards-based language proficiency, is one in which a trained language teacher uses the video program as a supplement to a quality language curriculum. The profession agrees that a qualified language teacher is the single most important factor in an instructional setting. Their recommended model makes use of a trained language teacher and provides students with the optimum opportunity to achieve standards-based proficiency.

Conclusion

Instructional videos for K-12 language learning show great promise. Advances have already been made in using technology to address some of the goals set by the national standards, in particular those of cultures, connections, and communities. Recent state and federally funded projects (Rosenbusch et al., 2003; Tollefson, 2003) have shown great innovation in the use of technology to overcome some of the obstacles to foreign language instruction in traditionally underserved areas.

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