Group 6 Design Proposal:

Teaching & Learning a foreign language – An online non-credit course for adults

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Globalization brings together people and cultures in unprecedented ways, with technology playing a primary role in this phenomenon. Today we are more mobile and move easily – both physically and virtually – around the globe for business and pleasure. As a result, the ability to communicate with people from other cultures and who speak different languages is more important than ever. With these things in mind we have designed an educational resource that will deliver language lessons based on modern educational best practices, anchored in Situated Cognition, Activity Theory and Constructivism.

The design will be for a non-credit post-secondary continuing education language course. Students who have been accepted into the program can use these modules and receive the same academic and technical support available to students in face-to-face programs.

The activities in each module will be presented using a combination of three languages to demonstrate the flexibility of the design for adaption into various languages. This flexibility is one of the design's strengths, ensuring its success to deliver quality online lessons to the target learners.

1. Key Frameworks

Evidence suggests that technology-based language instruction can be as effective as teacher-delivered instruction (Zhao, 2003). Our online foreign language non-credit course will target adults learners who are under the scales A2 and B1 (lower-intermediate/intermediate level) in the Common European Framework (CEF). This three-unit module will fit coherently into a language course in the Continuing Studies of a college or university. The underlying design's concept model (Norman, 1999) is to offer learners a different perspective on teaching and

learning a foreign language through affordances that bridge the gap between cultures and enable learners' to reflect on their own culture.

There is ample evidence that people cannot learn successfully unless they are both motivated to learn and believe that they will be able to use what they are learning in a way that interests them. Thus, we have employed a combination of situated practice and constructivist principles (described in the second section in more detail) to ensure that we consider the socio-cultural needs and identities of all learners, the learners are active and engaged, and feel secure to take risks and trust the guidance of their peers and teachers within this course (New London Group, 1996).

We aim to design language-learning activities considering semiotic domains, which Gee (2003) defines as oral or written languages, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, and more that communicate distinctive types of meaning. This can also be a set of activities that encourage learners to think and act in certain ways. Examples of tools that are included in this approach are wikis and educational games. Bruns and Humphreys (2005) researched wikis as part of social constructivist pedagogical, and in our design will "provide a great opportunity for students' collaboration, coproduction of texts argument and interaction" (p. 27). Educational games offer learners engaging, immersive play-space in which to stay, explore and learn, as they do in commercial games. De Castell and Jenson (2003) pointed out that commercial games quickly develop the players' skills quickly and gives rewards, which is an important aspect for educational games.

However, throughout the design we remain committed to the centrality of learners' goals to the design and its success. As Perkins identified, learning is enhanced "for any performance we

want to teach" when it provides learners with direct guidance on how to achieve their goals (Reigeluth, 1999, p. 1)

Finally, to ensure we approach this project in a manner that will ensure learners' engagement and success, we have taken Reigeluth's (1999) words on the nature of design-oriented theories to heart, and will be guided by theories that "are probabilistic rather than deterministic, which means they increase the chances of attaining the goals rather than ensuring attainment of the goals" (p. 2).

Media

There are a number of media formats and educational technologies available to design online learning materials. Siemens (2002) argues that the challenge is to select the media type that most effectively presents the learning material in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The following steps, outlined by Siemens, will be our guidelines for selecting media to achieve the desired results and bring the language to life for our learners.:

1. Identify the learning outcomes, that is what learners can do, demonstrate or produce at the end of the unit
2. Rate the outcomes according to The Common European Framework levels
3. Determine media characteristics that apply to this situation, keeping in mind that no tool is perfect for every situation.
4. Select media based on availability, expertise, expense, etc.

Flexibility of design

Our design will act as a framework that could be transferable to any other language. As evidence of this, we will include examples of English, French and Spanish activities. The goals, described below, can easily be applied to learning any language.

2. Intentions & Positions

The design will encourage and enable:

- **Skill acquisition through problem based learning:** The problems will be relevant, authentic, and engaging, but ill-defined to allow learners to view them from many angles, construct their own interpretations, and create their own solutions (Jonassen, 1999). The design will leave instructions implicit so students can construct their own creative solutions (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).
- **Contextualized learning**: The problems will follow the tenets of Activity Theory and Situated Cognition, specifically that authentic tasks and contexts are central to meaningful learning (Spasser, 1999; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Interestingly, Brown, Collins, and Duguid use the example of learning language and vocabulary to illustrate the challenge of learning without meaningful context: "Learning from dictionaries, like any method that tries to teach abstract concepts independently of authentic situations, overlooks the way understanding is developed through continued, situated use" (p. 33).
- **Learner agency:** Learners' interests will drive the design, with the teacher acting as a facilitator and guide, directing when needed and acting as a resource for ideas. Learners can choose the modules they find interesting or relevant. Additionally, this design will include external web resources; once the course is completed learners can continue to access these resources, which will be particularly important for students who are learning the language of a culture they are currently immersed in.
- **Progress through design structure and inherent scaffolding:** The design will enable learners to progress and build their language proficiency at their own pace. To help

with this, learners will be encouraged to identify their learning goals, conduct investigations into points of interest, keep track of their own progress, and have opportunities to think about their own ideas and where they fit in with their learning, as well as those of others (Driscoll, 2005).

- **Interaction and collaboration:** The use of knowledge building tools will allow learners to construct socially shared knowledge, collaborate on decision making and work together to articulate their ideas (Jonassen, 1999).

(An outline of the activities used to support these goals is included in Section 4.)

There is ample evidence to justify these goals in the theories of Situated Cognition, Activity Theory and Constructivism. First, Situated Cognition proposes that authentic cultural situations that engage learners in activity are essential (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Tools can be acquired and used to understand the world, but the learner may not be able to use them (Brown, Collins, & Duguid). Lampert's teaching of multiplication also emphasizes using the characteristics of cognitive apprenticeship, such as students understanding the legitimacy of their implicit knowledge and its ability as a scaffolding device, through a starter task based on a familiar activity. Finally, we will draw on the concept of students generating their own solutions to problems to help them become more creative problem solvers (Brown, Collins, & Duguid).

Next, Activity Theory stresses the importance of active learning within an appropriate setting and context (Spasser, 1999). In addition, as Kutti identified, motivated activities are realized through goal-oriented actions that are accomplished through conditions-contingent operations (Spasser).

Finally, Constructivism dictates that learners must be active participants in their learning, constructing their understanding as they attempt to make sense of their experiences (Driscoll,

2005). As Driscoll points out, they learn from examples but more importantly by doing. Activities should enable learners to "solve ill structured problems, acquire content knowledge in complex domains along with critical thinking and collaboration skills" (p. 391). Finally, he emphasizes focusing on higher-order goals to ensure the necessary scaffolding is there for learners.

Assessment

Evaluations are an important way for students to mark their progress and feel a sense of accomplishment: "Assessment is one of the most powerful drivers of innovation and change in education, as it defines the goals for both learners and teachers" (Department for Education and Skills, in Jenkins, 2003, p. 32). In our design, assessment will be used for a variety of reasons, including providing feedback, enabling learners to correct errors, motivating learners, and consolidating their understanding (Jenkins, 2003). We will employ a variety of approaches and methods, such as wikis, peer-assessment, multiple-choice questions and more.

Social Context

Despite a wealth of theoretical support, some educators and commentators argue that an online environment is not an appropriate environment for all learners, particularly to learn something as socially dependent as language. Arguments against online learning include students lacking the necessary technical skills, limited access to technology, or the need for discipline to engage in an online course. While these criticisms may apply to some learners, they highlight the need for learners to be evaluated by a course advisor.

However, globalization has increased the need for cross-cultural understanding and the removal of barriers between people and nations, and technology broadens the educational possibilities for language acquisition, allowing access to various natural situations and native

language speakers than otherwise would be available. People are driven to acquire foreign languages to support travel, business, general interest, and migration. In these globalized times of lifelong learning, online language courses are an important addition to any Continuing Education program.

Technology Solution

The course will be delivered via Moodle because it provides numerous of ways to enhance teaching, is flexible and relatively easy to update and modify, is free and can include useful tools and plug-ins, such as discussion forums, audio and video clips and links to authentic materials. In addition, our goal is to create a shell that can be modified by language teachers to suit their students' level or language (as mentioned in the first section); using an open source tool such as Moodle ensures the greatest number of teachers can benefit. According to Perkins and Pfaffmam (2006), commercial systems are often expensive to purchase and maintain and sometimes require installation of special software, which Moodle does not.

3. Key Concepts and Contexts

Our Moodle-based design will be geared to promote communication in a foreign language in authentic life situations. The target learners are adults who have completed some higher education and are in the workforce, but need to learn the language for travel, business, employment, or general interest. The learners have access to high speed connection to the Internet and they are highly motivated independent learners with hectic schedules. Our design will allow them to achieve their goals in terms of developing language skills based on particular objectives; they will have a choice of four or five authentic life situations. As Zhao (2003) notes, "Access and exposure to engaging, authentic, and comprehensible yet demanding materials in the target language is essential for successful language learning" (p. 13).

Key design elements

Once the learners have chosen the modules they want to access, the design will present specific activities (represented by graphical icons) to build their language skills. Each module will present opportunities in context for learners to choose which areas of language to focus on, including:

- Vocabulary, expressions, verbs, and grammar
- Sentences for a basic conversation
- Dramatization of an authentic communication in a real life situation
- Online learning tasks that target real life situations

Each module will then be broken into sections that offer parallel activities where the learner will progressively build competence in the target language (Lax, Taylor, Wilson-Pauwels, & Scardamalia, 2004). For example, while learning the sentences for a basic conversation, the learner will follow steps such as:

- Modeling of similar discussions through videos or podcasts
- Discussion with peers
- Oral practice based on real-life situations
- Oral discussion with class or teleconferencing with peers

These activities will include use of videos and scripts, Internet sites, "interactions with the computer (written or spoken language or a combination of both) or with remote audiences through the computer" (Zhao, 2003, p. 15-16), games, simulations, and more. They will encourage all aspects of language acquisition: listening, reading, speaking and writing. The site will also feature a range of tools to promote a knowledge-building environment, such as discussion forums or interactive audio or video conferencing with their peers or teacher.

Classroom and foreign culture

Although the learners will be able to progress at their own pace, they will have opportunities, by doing self or peer evaluations, to critically approach learning and give and receive feedback to ameliorate the knowledge-building process. Gee (2003) argues, "The learner needs to learn not only how to understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain, but in addition, needs to learn how to think about the domain at a 'meta' level as a complex system of interrelated parts" (p. 25).

In addition, units will feature links to information on the cultural and historical details of the target language's location. The academic scholarship of this particular context will focus on cultural differences and approaches in which learners will develop their "capacity to speak up, to negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives" (New London Group, 1996, p. 67).

Most importantly, the learners will have to acquire the skills to function in a foreign language in authentic situations. This fact will affect our design in the sense that it will have to be adapted to that particular individual learner.

Progressive design

Recent developments in educational technology will also be taken into consideration in our design project since our target learners are potentially a technologically adept and open-minded. The methodology used will adapt to "the language and style of the students. It means going faster, less step by step, more in parallel, with more random access, among other things" (Prensky, 2001, p. 4). The details of the technologies involved are described in the following section.

4. InterActivities

The goal of the interactivities included in our design is to create an immersive space within which learners can build their language skills through a variety of both individual and collaborative activities.

Table 1

Design Goals	*Supporting Tools*
Skill acquisition through problem-based learning	Videos, interactive activities in Keynote, PowerPoint, etc.
Contextualized learning	Readings from newspapers, books, magazines, etc.
Learner agency	Ability to choose activities and create own materials, case studies, etc.
Progress through design structure and inherent scaffolding	Quizzes, oral and written assessments, etc.
Interaction and collaboration	Wikis, blogging, discussion areas, etc.

Chat Rooms

Students can communicate verbally and in writing (for example in http://www.voxopop.com/ or via web conferencing software). The students and learners can also connect through Skype.

Wikis

These are a useful collaboration tool, allowing students to work together on writing stories, letters, dialogues, etc., building on one another's work. We will activate the Moodle wiki tool.

Podcasts

These enable students to practice listening. For the English learners, the team will use podcasts available online, such the ones below from www.eslpod.com, suitable for adult professionals:

- Getting directions http://www.eslpod.com/website/show_podcast.php?issue_id=7717514
- Arriving for an appointment: http://www.eslpod.com/website/show_podcast.php?issue_id=4203563
- Contracts: http://www.eslpod.com/website/show_podcast.php?issue_id=4006703

Additional resources include http://www.businessenglishpod.com/ and http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/, which includes resources for learning a number of languages. It also features accompanying scripts, and provides students with an opportunity to become familiar with different accents. We will also create our own for additional situations covered in the modules.

Videos

These can be useful as listening tools, but there are also a number of tools available online that enable students to create their own videos.

- Quick video creation: http://www.xtranormal.com/
- Building avatars and adding 2-minute narrations (to be used by both students and teachers as examples of target language on each page): http://www.voki.com/

Images

Photographs and graphics will enhance the Moodle site. A number of free or inexpensive tools will support this:

- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
- http://www.istockphoto.com/index.php
- http://www.dreamstime.com/free-photos
- http://www.clipart.com/fr

The course could also involve students contributing their own images, around which assignments would revolve, through a shared Flickr account.

eLearning Objects

Games and animated activities can provide learners with contribute to the immersive nature of this site. Tools for their creation include:

- Situated simulations that provides learners with a risk-free environment in which to practice: http://udutu.com/
- Games that encourage both competition and enjoyment: http://www.contentgenerator.net/

Language Tools

As mentioned in previous sections, our design will include links to external resources that scaffold students' use of authentic resources or provide language help. These include:

- Translation cues for any website: http://lingro.com/ (as you hover over word, shows translation in cue)
- A visual thesaurus: http://www.visualthesaurus.com/?vt

Criteria

All tools will be judged on their ability to allow learners to take an active role in their language acquisition, increase the level of interaction between learners, support the creation of a community of practice, increase students' ability to engage with authentic materials, and develop learners listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities.

Conclusion

Our proposal outlines a design that incorporates authentic, contextualized, interactive, collaborative and problem-based learning. By intertwining these elements, learners can engage with the material and be encouraged to engage in lifelong language learning. This rich format will provide a flexible and adaptable shell that language teachers can easily adapt to their specific language courses. While there are many language courses available online, ours will be notable for its flexibility, from a teacher's perspective, and the goals of truly situated practice that will ensure learners have meaningful language skills and cultural knowledge.

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