Online Courses for Second and Foreign Language Learning: Principles of Design and Delivery

Introduction:
While Sherren and Boettcher (1997) fleetingly suggest that distance learning might be traced back 2000 years to St. Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians, most discussions consider distance education to have started with text based correspondence courses in the mid-19th century. Beginning in the early 20th century, radio as a new instructional medium gave way to closed circuit TV, followed by broadcast television, and by the 1970s, instruction was being delivered via the internet (Nasseh, Boettcher & Conrad, Sherren & Boettcher, Distance Learning Net, Online Education). In the 21st century, Web 2.0 enhanced distance learning by offering the possibility of designing fully online learning spaces to facilitate learning activities while providing instant interaction among learners. Additional features of Web 2.0 include virtual environments which promote participation, collaboration, live links to additional resources, and assessment and feedback instruments, to name just a few.

In 2006, Salman Khan founded the online Khan Academy “with the goal of changing education for the better by providing a free world-class education to anyone anywhere.” (www.khanacademy.org). The most recent iteration of online education is massive open online courses (MOOCs). Educause describes a MOOC as “a model for delivering learning content online to any person who wants to take a course, with no limit on attendance.” (www.educause.edu). Although initially envisioned as non-credit courses, academic credits have been awarded for the completion of MOOCs in some higher education institutions (www.msn.com).

While online courses in languages are becoming more common in colleges and universities, Solveig Olsen’s 1978-9 survey of college language departments regarding plans for offering computer assisted courses demonstrates that this change has not been positively embraced by all. 85% of Olsen’s respondents answered negatively, saying they had no plans to offer online language courses and expressed “suspicion”, “anxiety” and “fear” about the idea (Bush 1997). On the other hand, while an exact count is obviously elusive, online study of multiple languages is widely offered by various agencies (www.omniglot.com), and countless established colleges and universities are engaged in online learning in multiple disciplines. Given the “paradigm shift” (Cummins 2013) by post-secondary institutions and students towards online learning, and the rapid growth of online language courses (Allen & Seaman 2013), it is essential that these courses reflect the best principles of online course design and employ appropriate pedagogical practices, with judicious use of the technology tools of the medium.

Course Design Considerations
There are multiple factors to consider before one begins building an online language course. The instructor is the content and learning specialist. To convert an instructor’s vision and pedagogy into an online course, there needs to be collaboration with a specialist in course design for online delivery. The following considerations at the course design stage lead to particularly effective online language teaching and learning.
1. Is the course brand new? Is it a re-design and if so, was it previously offered online or in-class? It is essential that the course be appropriate for the medium. The lesson for online instructors in Marshall McLuhan’s pronouncement “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964) is that one simply cannot shift content from one medium to another; rather, one must acknowledge the characteristics and potential of the new medium, and re-design course materials appropriately. Even if the course was offered online before, the rapid expansion of internet based applications for language learning requires ongoing assessment of new tools for integration into re-designed courses.

2. How does the course fit into the curriculum? Is the course an elective or a core requirement in the degree programme? Is it a stand-alone course or is it a foundation for other courses? Must it merge seamlessly into follow-up courses? Are follow-up courses offered online or in-class? The answers to these questions will situate the course in the curriculum, and help identify the learning outcomes.

3. Who is the target student population? Will the students hail from any discipline, wanting or needing to complete a language credit? Are they beginners, have they taken previous language studies or are they heritage language speakers?

4. What are the learning objectives of the course? Is it a four skills oriented language course? Or does it focus on a specific skill set – pronunciation, listening comprehension or writing, for example? What will successful students be able to do or demonstrate in each skill area at the end of the course and how will it be measured?

5. What course materials best suit the teaching objectives and learning outcomes? In what format will they be made available? What are the best materials and respective formats for the medium and the learner? Publishers’ sophisticated websites offer e-books and e-manuals, practice activities, assessments, cultural enrichment and engagement trackers for individualised learning and instructor overview. Free or paid online language learning sites offer linguistic and cultural input, and others provide access to synchronous and asynchronous learning communities. It is possible to customise a unique combination of online resources to provide students all the required course content and activities. Alternatively, a hard copy version of a text book, supported by online activities may best suit the instructor’s teaching styles, the students and the learning outcomes. Once the learning outcomes of a course have been established, they should guide the final selection of course content and formats which will best nurture those goals and enhance the desired learning outcomes.

6. Which technology tools are best? Technology should always come second to sound pedagogy and course design (Rovai and Barnum 2003 as cited in Fahy 2008). Technology can provide access to a plethora of realia, exposing students to “real language in its full context” (Pusack & Otto 1997). It lets students take control of their learning environment, allowing them to process and create content in a reiterative, self-paced manner. While new technology is always emerging, there have been warnings against ignoring proven technology in favour of latching on to the newest trend (Walther, Gay and Hancock 2005 as cited in Fahy 2008). Pusack and
Otto (1997) warn that “glitzy bells and whistles...are no substitute for solid pedagogical design and content.” Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999) discuss multiple findings showing that when students are overtly aware of the technology, their performance is negatively impacted. Ultimately, the best technology is the one with which the instructor is conversant. Students will first turn to their instructor for help, and his or her ability to provide solutions (or direct students to them) may affect their performance, satisfaction level and the attrition rate in the course. Students should find the technology accessible, easy to learn and use and it should be clear to them how the technology supports their learning.

7. How does one nurture an online language learning community? The creation of a supportive learning community is one of the top ten best practices required in online teaching. In comparison with face-to-face courses, which naturally provide opportunities for students to connect with each other, the online learning environment requires “[m]ore explicit nurturing and planning for a learning community to develop.” (Boettcher and Conrad 2010). A sense of isolation is a major factor contributing to high attrition rates in online learning. Scheffer and Konetes (2010) posit that this sense of isolation exists because “the concept of community is often viewed as location specific”. Community building in online courses requires the instructor to provide opportunities for community building in the absence of a physical, shared learning space. In a language course, the opportunity for students to engage with each other and the instructor in the target language is essential. This is usually accomplished via discussion boards on specific course topics and use of online learning groups. It is also important to provide informal spaces for interaction on topics not specifically related to course work. For example, one of the authors designates a discussion space called “Café” for postings on personal life experiences, current events, interests, or any other topic related to the target language and culture, general learning strategies or even personal interests, which are not a formal course activity. Group pages on social networking sites like Facebook offer additional possibilities for community building. Multiple studies have concluded that “students are more candid in their comments in these online discussions than in most classroom exchanges” (Beauvois 1997). In online language courses, the value added benefit is that while building community, students can also build precious communicative and intercultural proficiencies.

8. What does the course website say about the course?
When students log into the course, what is the first thing they see? Is the site inviting? Does it make them want to stay and explore? How is page space used? Are there images? Is there colour? Are the spacing, highlighting, and content partitioning applied to full effect? Is there too much white space or is the page too cluttered for comfort? Standardised institutional requirements or the online course designer’s preferences may contribute greatly to these elements. However, instructors are encouraged to participate in the process. Use the student view to navigate the site while it is under construction to see what students see. Ask students or colleagues to log in and give feedback on design, user friendliness, accessibility and navigability of the course site. Navigate the site asking questions such as, “Are the instructions clear?”, “Do the links work?” or “If I were a new student, would I know what I am supposed to do?”
9. Is all procedural information posted on the course site? Perhaps even more than in face-to-face courses, it is essential that all policies and procedures be in place before an online course begins. For example, in the authors’ online language courses, students must score a minimum passing grade of 50% in the final exam in order to pass the course, regardless of previous achievement throughout the semester. This is a key piece of information that students must know from day one. From the beginning, policies, expectations, clear course objectives and standards of student behaviour should be set. Examples of these include descriptions of assessments and their values, due dates, rubrics, minimum technology requirements, policies regarding late submission of assessments, instructor availability and methods of communication, what constitutes acceptable academic behaviour and what is unacceptable. Much of this information will be institutionally driven, but before the course begins, consider everything that students need to know.

Lessons learned and best practices

Leaving behind the ‘traditional’ classroom can be a challenge at first to both instructor and student. However, a well-designed online course and an engaged instructor can guide students to maximize their learning and achieve success. Some best practices gathered from past experience include:

1. Build a course website that is welcoming to all students and promotes engagement with the course.
   - Devise a page structure and repeat it throughout the site. This predictability is comforting to students and they learn quickly how to navigate the site to find the information they need.
   - Chunk information into manageable bits. Identify the chunks with intuitive labels that repeat throughout the course. As an example, in the courses of one of the authors, all information chunks are labeled “Read”, “Listen/Watch” or “Do”.
   - Embedded links or connections to other course resources should open within the course site in a consistent fashion (new tab or new window).
   - As much as possible, consolidate resources within the course site, rather than have students visit multiple sites to access content. For example, if your course material includes content from a publisher’s website, negotiate with the publisher to have that content imported into your site. An added benefit of this is that students will not need to create multiple accounts and login procedures on many sites.
   - Choose technology tools wisely: be knowledgeable about them and use them to enrich the learning objectives, the activities and assessments of the course. The tools that are selected should be appropriate to their application. This facilitates student engagement rather than introduces technical challenges that might frustrate students.
   - Be inclusive of students with physical or cognitive disabilities, who may need alternative ways to access course content. Standard accessibility requirements should be embedded into the course by the course designer. Meet individual requests for accommodation on a case by case basis.
• Organize information on the site so that future editing and revision are easy to accomplish.

2. Be rigorous about the format, clarity and accessibility of assessments. Some of the best characteristics of online learning activities and assessments are:

• They are designed for the online environment
• They reflect the learning objectives and contribute to development of the targeted language skills
• They are clearly articulated, with detailed descriptions
• They are supported by course materials and other resources easily found on the course site
• They are accompanied by examples, best practices and rubrics
• They offer “a variety of teaching strategies to accommodate a variety of learning style preferences” (Sanchez & Gunawardena 1998)
• They provide opportunities to submit practice assessments. This is particularly important in online language courses, given the intrinsically dialogic nature of language learning. Such practice must receive timely and constructive feedback. Truman (2008) posits that “[s]elf-correction is … woven into the fabric of independent learning.”

3. Listen to the students. Based on student feedback from online courses taught by the authors (comments in the online forums, formal course evaluations or conversations in person after the course had ended), there are several best practices that an instructor should consider to enhance the student experience.

• Humanize the course for each student: “be a person”
Students, especially those new to online learning, may struggle with the fact that they do not see a real person ‘in charge’ of the course. Regular interactions with the instructor, by e-mail or in an online forum, greatly help students adapt to the online learning environment and serve to personalize the course experience. Students are reminded that they are not alone, that their instructor is, in fact, there and following their progress and that there is someone they can turn to if they need help. The choice of communication method and style will vary from one instructor to another; however there are a number of specific approaches which have proven very effective. Set up an ‘Introductions’ discussion in which students might introduce themselves to the group, explain their reasons for taking the course and/or describe what they hope to achieve. The instructor should also participate by posting a few pertinent personal details and replying to each student’s post to either welcome them to the course or ask a follow-up question. This tells students that their instructor is not only a “real” person, but that he/she is present in the course and taking an interest in what they have to say. Setting that tone right from the start can significantly enhance communication throughout the course.
• Communicate for the medium
Ensure when replying ‘electronically’ that the tone conveys the intended message. E-
mail and discussion replies can be easily misinterpreted and students may imagine a negative tone or criticism that wasn’t intended. Humour in online communication with students is an elusive goal and attempts at it may be misinterpreted. Use clear language and examine whether there is room for miscomprehension on the part of students. Some instructors may choose to use emoticons and expressive punctuation to clarify the tone of their reply.

• Be available on the course site, but not omnipresent
The online instructor’s role is to guide students through their own learning journey and be available, but in the background. The ideal is to strike a constructivist inspired balance between this availability and allowing students the room they need to embrace the course, to discover and grow, thus managing their own learning. An absentee instructor – who may post only a single introductory message at the beginning of semester, for example – may cause students to become increasingly less motivated to continue in the course. An instructor who is too present – for example one who might post an immediate reply to every thread in a Discussion – may cause students to stop participating. Once the instructor has expressed an opinion, discussion amongst peers is likely to cease and few students will question the instructor’s point of view. Finding this balance is challenging, but is necessary to allow students to find their own voice and take charge of their learning experience. To encourage discussion amongst peers, the instructor may choose to post a follow-up message, inviting other students to share their opinions on the subject. Being available to students does not mean that the instructor should be omnipresent. Students should, however, be given a reasonable expectation of when they can expect a reply to their question or concern, be it by e-mail or a posting in the discussion thread.

• Repeat and remind
In response to an inquiry, an instructor should be able to say that all the course information is on the website and students should be aware of it. This does not mean that he or she should say this to students. In fact, instructors should repeat and remind students of expectations, assessments, important dates and availability of resources whenever it appears necessary. Successful ways of doing so include posting reminders of important activities and dates as news items on the course site or as discussion posts. One of the authors sends an e-mail to the class at the beginning of each week, congratulating students on work accomplished, acknowledging discussion activity, summarizing assessments recently completed, providing a reminder of what is expected in the coming week and giving tips on navigating the week’s learning materials and tasks. Despite these reminders, some students do not complete tasks in a timely fashion, and they do not fully profit from the individual lessons, which often build upon previously acquired skills and knowledge. The instructor can monitor progress and make suggestions to help ensure benchmarks are met by all students. She can also provide individualised guidance to students falling short of benchmarks; however, the onus ultimately remains with the student to complete the course requirements in a timely fashion.
• Build a flexible course format for personalized learning
Students appreciate the flexibility offered by online courses – that they are able to
complete the course work on their own time, at their own pace and from anywhere
Internet-accessible – and they are able to integrate their studies into busy schedules of
work, family or other academic obligations. While online courses are designed with a
proposed schedule or framework (for example, one lesson or unit for each week of the
academic semester), this framework can be more of a suggestion than a requirement.
Courses should be built so that students can navigate at their own pace, returning to
units to review material or moving ahead to learn more complex material. It is through
balancing this flexibility and accommodating the constraints of the institution’s standard
practices that scheduling of access periods and due dates for assessments can be
planned.

4. Use course evaluations to improve the course
The lack of face-to-face contact with an instructor may encourage students to be more frank in
their evaluation of an online course. Student feedback is essential to understand the course
from the point of view of the user. While suggestions made by students may not be possible
from a technological standpoint – or advisable from a pedagogical perspective - student
opinions and suggestions provide valuable insight into their course experience and the
development of resources for future courses. Examples of course qualities students have
identified as valuable to them are:

• A clear, logical course layout that is easy to navigate.
• Predictability – if students know that a certain icon always leads to a specific course
activity, or if all help files are stored in the same location, they are reassured by the
familiarity.
• Use of real-life examples and applications. Use an amusing anecdote to make a point
or include a skills-based activity at the end of a unit. Profile a real-life situation in which
students can apply the information or skills they have just learned. Making the course
relevant to “real-life” helps the students appreciate the value and pertinence of the
course material.
• Instructors who are present on the course site to answer requests for assistance and
who provide timely, meaningful feedback on assignments and assessments.
• Assessments that are clearly based on course content and activities.
• Language courses that provide opportunities to also learn about culture.
• Opportunities to interact with peers through discussions and group work.
• Technology tools which are simple to use and serve a clear purpose.

5. One final note
Post a final message at the end of the semester, but before the final assessment or exam (if
applicable), thanking students for their participation and reminding them of their successes and
progress made throughout the course. Wish them well on the final assessment and remind
them of ways in which they can access assistance before the final assessment.
Conclusion
Over the last 150 years, distance education has evolved into fully online education and now covers courses in every possible discipline, including second and foreign languages. Web 2.0 tools allow and demand that online learning instructors and designers create courses that provide rigorous learning activities informed by pedagogically sound learning objectives and appropriate technology tools. Many points in online course development have been identified, requiring thoughtful consideration. As well, best practices in online language teaching, both from the instructors’ and the students’ points of view have been identified. The constantly changing nature of the internet as a learning environment and the ongoing invention of new technology suitable for language learning require continuous monitoring and assessment of their suitability for online education. Web 3.0 promises changes leading to an even more interactive and intuitive learning environment. However, what will not change in online education is that we must continue to harness the power of the medium to create pedagogically sound courses, characterized by good design, inclusiveness, engaged teaching, meaningful activities and individualised learning which require critical thinking and lead to real world skills. In the end, future online learning will be what all good learning opportunities are - meaningful to the learner. This is not just true for online language courses. It is true for all.


Cummins, L. “From a Distance: Creating On-Line Learning Communities that Engage and Promote Learning”. In *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2013* (pp. 370-375). Chesapeake, VA: AACE, 2013.


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