

The Lure of Remote Labs

Dr. Richard Laden lays out the reasons for using a Language Lab and extending it by remote access

Schools are increasingly incorporating language labs

and looking for software that will bring language-lab capability to their existing computer labs. Most teachers have come to see the value of technology for speeding up language learning, but many teachers are still wary of technology and are not sure whether there is true pedagogical benefit in it. If we consider what progress students make when they are actually immersed in a foreign language and culture, however, and think about how closely the usual language class approximates this experience versus what can be accomplished in a lab and by accessing lab materials remotely, in homework and distance learning, there is a clear rationale for incorporating in-lab and remote practice into the curriculum. Furthermore, there are sound reasons for concluding that technology can optimize the student's time invested in learning a language, and can also help instructors make the most efficient use of the time they can devote to their students. Here are some of the major ones; they explain why a solution like E-LangLab's LangLab product, which facilitates four-skill language learning with multimedia support in both in-school use and over the Internet, can do much to help institutions cope with the time and resource constraints teachers almost always face.

- Use of the lab and its resources, including by remote access,

increases dramatically the amount of time students are exposed to authentic language and cultural materials, as well as the time students spend practicing language skills themselves. In the classroom, the usual sort of instructor-student interaction results in students spending most of their time listening to other students with rudimentary language skills, since the instructor must have students participate and respond in turn rather than simultaneously. With appropriate software, students are working in parallel, and students spend virtually all their time absorbing authentic language and responding to it by speaking or writing, as is the case when immersed in the civilization and interactions with native speakers.

- Additionally, at the college level, the availability of materials for drop-in lab use at the student's convenience means that the student can receive exposure to the language that greatly exceeds what can be done in class, since students are unlikely (and usually unable, because of scheduling conflicts) to take a class that would have an equivalent number of class hours at fixed times on a regular basis.

- The further convenience of on-demand remote access ensures that students will be able to overcome scheduling constraints imposed by their involvement in multiple activities and will be able to

find time to work with the material.

■ Appropriate software optimizes the instructor's time. In a regular class the instructor must try to give students equal opportunities to participate, without necessarily being able to focus on those who need more help. Additionally, teacher-student interaction is constrained by the linearity of time and the relative slowness with which students with imperfect language skills generally can respond. The occasions an instructor has to interact with each student are too few; nevertheless, during each occasion the time the instructor spends interacting with each student is generally in excess of what is required to evaluate the student's skill level, diagnose problems, and give the student guidance in improving. In a language lab (and outside, during remote assessment and in providing feedback), an instructor can quickly sample or "spot check" student's linguistic performance, focus on the problems and on the students who need more work and guidance, and skip over or respond in a more perfunctory way to those who appear to be progressing satisfactorily. Additionally, teacher-student interaction can be initiated by the student: since software permits the student to call the instructor and ask for help, a monitored session is somewhat like an "office hour" in which the instructor is available to all, and can devote time in proportion to need rather than arbitrarily striving to give equal attention to all for a necessarily short period.

■ Working at their own pace in the language lab (and outside, when doing homework by remote access), students can use their time optimally. Given a diversity of activities that teach the same skills and aspects of a language, students will be able to select those activities that best suit their individual styles of learning. Students can also concentrate on those aspects of the language that they need to practice more, rather than being constrained by the one-size-fits-all approach and pace that must be used when material is presented in class. Students consequently see results faster, and the satisfaction of accomplishment tends to make them spend more time interacting with the material. Additionally, because they are in a situation in which self-paced learning is possible, they tend to take responsibility for their learning and engage with it, rather than seeing themselves as "customers" or observers who can remain largely passive as the instructor labors to teach them.

■ In the lab (or virtual lab, in remote use), students can be exposed to many speakers of the language in a structured way, preparing them for the variety of voices and accents they will encounter when meeting native speakers and traveling or living in the country. They can work up to the level of proficiency that will let them understand films, plays, televised debates, and other contexts with multiple speakers.

■ In the classroom, students do not have the ability to replay what the teacher and others are saying or their own performance. In the lab, however, they can easily repeat material they have difficulty with, until they attain the requisite aural discrimination ability or learn to comprehend what they could not initially. Furthermore, they can listen to themselves and easily compare their own oral production with

models.

■ With language lab software such as LangLab, instructors have the ability to draw on a huge combinatorial system of elements and activities in creating lessons that elicit frequent response, rather than just feeding students large chunks of material in CD-ROM form, podcasts, etc. The variety of exercises and activities holds students' attention, while the frequency of response draws students in and makes language-learning a lot more compelling.

■ Similarly, the ability of such software to interweave elements in structured activities makes it far easier to work on all four language skills with each aspect of the language, ensuring that students master it in speaking and writing rather than simply recognizing it in reading and listening. This coordinated all-skill practice requires meticulous organization best conceived and implemented in advance, through selection and assembly of the appropriate files; it cannot easily be improvised in a regular class. Furthermore, the mixture of activities required to providing this all-skill practice in a regular classroom requires manipulation of various audio-visual devices in addition to frequent switching from one activity to another. Since time is lost in explanations and preparation during each switch, the actual instructional time is substantially less than with software that makes all materials immediately available in the appropriate form at the appropriate points.

■ Students take language-learning more seriously when the materials presented to them are authentic cultural artifacts, and particularly when they receive visual clues that present the cultural context of a language. In a regular classroom, the effort required to present visual material is significant enough that use of it generally takes the form of exposing students to large segments of material, to which they are reacting passively. Consequently, instructors have difficulty in judging what and how effectively the material is actually teaching the student. When materials are available in file form, including video in smaller segments, there is no time wasted in presenting a diversity of materials that provide the closest possible approximation to actual immersion in a culture; moreover, the frequent responses elicited from the student give the instructor a way of seeing how effectively students are learning.

■ Appropriate language-lab software supports and increases greatly the productivity of teacher-student interaction. In a regular class, an instructor has only a very small sample of each student's skill levels to evaluate. When students work in a lab and outside, making recordings that are available to the instructor afterward, the instructor has far more to go on, and the quick random-access sampling and evaluation of student's work possible in real-time monitoring and later, more leisurely assessment gives instructors a much better idea of how the student is progressing and what the student needs to concentrate on. Not only does the instructor have a clearer vision of the student's entire skill profile, but the instructor can also intervene and provide personalized feedback to students in a way not possible in class, and at the precise point needed, so that students can replay their recordings, compare their responses to a model and to the