

Faculty Enhancement Program Proposal
William B. Fischer
Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures
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**Course Development and Pilot: A Multilingual
Business Language Course in the Form of an
Actual e-Commerce Business**

Abstract

We propose to design and pilot a content-based instruction course that will combine language training with acquisition of business and technological skills. Intended outcomes for learners are increased language proficiency at a key level of learning, acquisition of technical and commercial skills along with the language learning, and exploration of career opportunities related to language study and international or multilingual business. Once developed, the course could be offered regularly, and perhaps even every quarter for limited repeated credit, with less staffing than needed for the pilot. It could also be distributed to other programs, offered at least in part by distance education, and adapted to other levels of language learning, including K-12.

Note: The project proposed here was developed in part as a small group activity by students in the course "Technology for Language Teachers." If the project is funded, select members of that group will be invited to help develop the basic course modules and serve as language and technology facilitators in the pilot course. After that, they may become the core of new teachers who begin long-term delivery of the course in new jobs which they have themselves created.

Overview and Outcomes

Our team proposes to design and pilot a content-based instruction course that will combine language training, initially in Spanish, French or German, with acquisition of business and technological skills. The course will simulate—and if possible even actually establish—a startup company whose several groups of employees, speaking their various languages to conduct their activities, will produce multilingual language resources that could be sold locally or by e-commerce to produce the company’s income. Intended outcomes for learners are increased language proficiency at a key level of learning, acquisition of technical and commercial skills along with the language learning, and exploration of career opportunities related to language study and international or multilingual business. External outcomes include the increased efficiency of offering a single course that involves several languages but is supervised by a single main faculty member, the promise of decreasing attrition between lower and upper levels of the language programs, and—nice but not necessary—the rather rare prospect of generating an actual profit that could be plowed back into the course and related student-oriented activities. Once developed, the course could be offered regularly, and perhaps even every quarter for limited repeated credit, with less staffing than needed for the pilot. It could also be distributed to other programs, offered at least in part by distance education, and adapted to other levels of language learning, including K-12. The outline and budget have been prepared in such a way that, if additional funding is available either from the Faculty Enhancement Program or from small outside grants, supplementary strands could be added to develop the course for ESL and as a training program for K-12 language teachers.

Background: Current Directions in Language Pedagogy

The area of foreign-language teaching in the U. S. during the past few decades has been characterized by sagging enrollment in traditional programs, internal re-examination of goals and practices, the influence of larger curricular developments outside the discipline, and increased demand for practical foreign-language instruction in our educational system and for foreign-language capabilities in business and government. Together these factors, amplified by research in language acquisition, have encouraged formulation and limited introduction of language programs that aim at practical proficiency or “communicative competence.” Developments in Oregon, particularly the inclusion of second languages as a core subject in K-12, the design of the Certificate of Initial Master (CIM) to include languages, and the institution of the Proficiency-Based Admissions Standards System (PASS) for admission to OUS institutions, are encouraging closer integration of all subjects and disciplines, the inclusion of language in other subject areas (“Language Across the Curriculum” [LAC]), and—conversely—the use of other subject areas as a vehicle for language instruction (“Content-Based Instruction” [CBI]). Members of the PSU Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures have been prominently active in K-16 language-program discussion, have produced related textbooks and research, and have moved their lower-level language programs in the the direction of a proficiency orientation and better articulation with exiting K-12 language learners who are now entering our programs and seeking accurate placement and appropriate continuing instruction. Our faculty have been similarly active in another area that is given special notice in progressive curricular development, including the process proficiencies mandated for K-12: technological competence, including creation of technology-based language instruction materials.

An important aspect to note here is the desirability of content-based instruction not just for the efficiency it offers in trying to kill two curricular birds with one logistically-motivated stone, but because such instruction may well in itself produce better language learning than conventional programs that emphasize acquiring the language as a content in

itself rather than explicitly and systematically using it to do something. In a classic work on teaching language to children, Curtin and Pesola remark that children learn language best when they are using it to learn something else. We think their observation can be valid also for learners who are no longer children, although most post-secondary and even middle/high-school programs have not yet accommodated that idea. Yet a sensible outside observer might well think that at least by the third year of college language instruction—if not earlier!—the learners should have a chance actually to *do* something real with the language, beyond some survival tourist functions offered as a change of pace to the purgatory of grammar concepts and vocabulary flashcards. Language instruction at PSU is not at all that bleak in approach, but a course that offered students a chance to practice how to make a living, or even produce a modest actual profit to re-invest in their program, would constitute a big innovation, one which would showcase PSU as an innovator in language instruction and general curricular innovation.

It is necessary to delve a little further into the particulars of language pedagogy to see why the proposed project fits so well both the larger needs of the educational system and the more specific desiderata of language learners who are approaching a genuinely useful command of skills. The dominant standards for describing foreign-language proficiency in the U. S. are those established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Below the level of the highly-trained, specialized language professional, ACTFL describes three levels of language competence: Novice (very limited function even in predictable everyday circumstances); Intermediate (able to communicate everyday-life content in brief sentence-type utterances); and Advanced (can produce, in present, past, and future time frames, modest clusters of sentences that describe and narrate in fair breadth everyday experience and limited vocational content).

PSU language programs have shown that reasonably capable and motivated students can reach the Intermediate level at the end of the first year or at least during second year—an achievement which has been documented recently by OUS outside assessment and which places PSU at the forefront of language teaching in OUS and, probably, other systems. But the Advanced level does not happen so quickly; a classic study from several decades ago found that not even many exiting language *majors* had reached the Advanced level. And yet it is the Advanced level, or a close approximation to it, that characterizes learners whose language skills would be most useful both to themselves as individuals and to a nation which hopes to maintain its strength and excellence in a global economy.

In short, Advanced users of foreign languages, while they are not the brilliant but rare Henry Kissingers or Hedy Lamarrs who can rise to celebrity status by using a non-native tongue to great effect (Lamarr held several technological patents), are the people who can achieve much by using their well-developed language skills as a major adjunct to their other talents and tools. Our proposal aims to beef up language proficiency at the key point where the Intermediate learner can see and strive toward the Promised Land of the Advanced second-language user. The project would not be possible without the groundwork laid in lower-level language programs at PSU (or, when extended, by appropriate language teaching elsewhere). But the project could do much to motivate the next developments in proficiency-oriented language instruction at what is now the appropriate level in which to institute change, both in higher ed and K-12.

To establish the feasibility of the project with regard to the competencies of the core team, it can be observed that very modest versions or limited ingredients of the basic idea of the experimental course have been tried out for several years in German 320, German for Business and Professional Purposes. Students there have experimented with producing resumes and job applications, doing vocational-interest presentations, maintaining office equipment while speaking/learning German, exploring careers, etc. But heretofore it has been impossible to make the big step to an intensive immersion in a second-language-based work situation, let alone to extend the experience across several languages.

Specific Goals & Outcomes of the Project

For the learners: broad-spectrum improvement in language skills, with focus on ACTFL Intermediate-High as the “watershed” level of competence for an everyday working atmosphere; acquisition of generic vocational vocabulary (“resumé,” “apply for a job”); good comprehension and some reproduction of office- and technology-specific language (“Is the stapler empty again?”, “Put the ZIP disk in the drive,” “Did you try to print it?”); acquisition of some technological and business skills without regard to language development (database, audio software, task assignment)—although inevitably some of the activity here will spill over into acquisition of language skills (how to say in French, “Learn this software or someone else will take your job!”).

For the FLL department, PSU, OUS, PPS, and the general educational system: a new course which can show the way to more courses, can strengthen articulation between K-12 and post-secondary, and can show how two or more areas of learning can be combined efficiently; a collection of learning modules that can be re-used with less investment in staff and effort and replicated beyond the immediate project.

The “Business”—Simulated or Actual

The core of the course will be the creation and continuation of a multi-language business—simulated or eventually, we hope, real—which will engage in the production, distribution, and sale of vocabulary “helper” lists of interest to the wide range of people who travel internationally. Thus, for example, the “company” would offer for several language combinations conveniently-packaged practical word- and phrase-lists for such popular activities as skiing vacations, wine-tasting, or car rental. The end-product would be offered in, perhaps, two forms: full-page lists to be kept in a notebook for study in advance of use (“ski pole,” “binding,” “lift”), and small-scale versions of the same lists that could be kept conveniently in the pocket of, say, a ski jacket for quick reference (“Where did you buy your equipment / goggles / lift ticket / sunblock?”). The possibilities, and thus the prospects for continuing the course, are endless; there are always more lists that can be made, reorganized, and marketed. More language combinations can be added. Distribution can be just local (laminated sheets and cards offered at the PSU bookstore), but it can also be far-reaching (.pdf files sold over the Internet—maybe at just a dollar a list, but to hundreds of buyers).

But from a pedagogical standpoint, the journey is more important than the destination. A key term in language pedagogy is “negotiation of meaning.” Language learning is facilitated by using a second language to carry out the business of living (the ACTFL Intermediate level) and to carry out basic occupational activities (the ACTFL Advanced level). The real point is not to make money—a little or a lot—by selling multilingual word lists (although that would be nice, and we have some good ideas about what to do if it actually happens). Rather, the real goal is to engage language learners by giving them something to do—something worthwhile but not too very easy—and then standing a little to the side, benevolently but not *too* helpfully, while they try to do their job and struggle to acquire language.

So running the “business” will require a lot of Dilbert-like activity, which will seem beside the point but which is actually the (a?) real focus of the learning. There will have to be an “intake” stage for the participants: skills evaluation (including language proficiency!); formation of teams; training (in the foreign language) in specialized job skills); managing personal conflicts; learning how to offer on-the-job small talk; negotiating raises, promotions, buy-outs, etc.

Course Design and Management

The proposed activity is actually TWO activities. We must design a simulated/actual business that will be an overt environment for learning, but must also design a course that will host that learning “behind the scenes.” We aim to pilot the course in Spring Quarter of 2001. So the design team will gather during Summer 2000, with continuation through the next academic year, to produce the specific syllabus and core materials. Depending on the funding, the team may be paid modestly, or else asked to contribute its work for personal professional development, a credit line on the resumé, feelings of glory, and the prospect of future employment PSU. Whatever the structure and schedule, the team will create the collection of generic modules that will lead the eventual course participants, whatever their target language, through the experiences that will constitute the realistic simulation or actual realization of doing business and living a real life while doing business in a foreign language.

Draft Informal Syllabus and Sample of Activities

First third of course: assess participants’ language, business, technical, and personal skills; develop group procedures while using the second language; develop/expand relevant technical skills (example: talk German while using Microsoft Word to save a file in plain text form for importation by a database).

Second third of course: get the business underway by setting goals, forming teams, and describing products; add specialized tech skills

Last third of course: add generally to tech and language skills, but emphasize use of both skills areas to demonstrate genuine ACTFL advanced competence: “This is our product, and we hope you will like it.”

Sample module (several class hours)—Students learn to use and maintain two pieces of equipment that will be used to prepare their product for the local and conventional distribution by mail: photocopier and laminator. Earliest stage: 1) acquisition of generic equipment vocabulary (“to press,” “to push,” “switch,” “lever,” etc.), and negotiation of simple mechanical tasks. 2) compilation of specialized vocabulary (“toner cartridge,” “heat source,” “to squeeze,” “plastic pouch”), probably from multilingual product manuals. 3) Exploration of structures useful in negotiating the specialized task (polite requests, passive voice, infinitive phrase). 4) Performance of the task for purposes of carrying out the work of the business (“These English-Spanish lists of sports and entertainment terms have to be printed and laminated sometime this week.” “Can you show me how to replace the toner cartridge?”) 5) Related writing task: Make the sign to put on the laminator warning users how not to pinch or burn their fingers when they use it. 6) Expansion of same functions to handle a new piece of equipment, in order both to do what people must do when they work, and to solidify the language currently being acquired.

External Funding

I am a two-time Eisenhower Grant co-director and expect to apply by 7 April 2000 for Eisenhower funding to support a similar but much larger project with Portland Public Schools. Students working for CIM and PASS in language courses at selected high schools would acquire technology skills and improve their language facility by carrying out projects that involve production of language classroom materials that are rich in authentic cultural content and language. Example: Teams of Spanish learners are taught, in Spanish, how to use digital cameras. They then collect pictures of building and product signs from local Spanish-language businesses, process them in simple graphics programs, and record them onto CD-ROMs for use in language classes where lower-level learners are acquiring the simpler skills of negotiating purchases of everyday household and personal items.

Budget & timeline detail

Advanced students of French, German, and Spanish to formulate suitable course language levels and develop a detailed draft syllabus that they can implement as facilitators in the pilot course (\$1000—summer 2000 and occasional meeting during academic year 2000-01. When the course is implemented, graduate students with appropriate language competence and pedagogical expertise will serve as facilitators in the pilot course; (\$2000 Spring quarter 2001, with hope to repeat in the summer and then maintain in subsequent years)

\$3000 total main budget

\$1000 add ESL component: \$200 for assistance with design, \$800 for facilitator when pilot version is conducted
\$1000 add module for K-12 teacher training: \$750 for master teachers to assist with design, \$250 for materials to constitute teaching kits, customized for younger learners with lower-level language skills, to be produced during the course for long-term use in classrooms at participant's schools

\$2000 total supplementary budget