Insights from an Online Foreign Language Course:
What Every Teacher Needs to Know

By Ann Marie Gunter and Bobby Hobgood

Terri, a sophomore in a rural western North Carolina high school, arrives at her designated computer in the school's distance learning lab, pulls out her notebook and logs in to her online Mandarin Chinese course. She puts on her headset with the microphone and logs in to her Skype (www.skype.com) account. While she's waiting for her conversation coach to call her via Skype, she reads two messages from her course inbox: one from her instructor containing feedback on the last assignment and the other from her friend, Pat, who is a classmate from the eastern side of the state. Meanwhile, the Distance Learning Advisor pauses at her workstation to tell her that the technology specialist has properly configured the word processor to type Chinese characters. Terri responds, "Xiè, xiè" (Thanks!). Within minutes, she hears her conversation coach greeting her through the headset with "Nǐ hǎo" and their session begins.

Terri is a student in Online Mandarin Chinese I developed by LEARN NC, a K-12 outreach program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education, and offered through the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS). This course is the first in a series funded by a federal Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant received by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). In conjunction with an Advanced Placement (AP) grant, this initiative brings five levels (I, II, III, IV, and AP) of Chinese language courses to students across North Carolina.

The courses cultivate all four language skills and culture, with an emphasis on speaking and listening during Levels I and II. The focus on reading and writing increases as students progress through the upper levels into the culminating AP course. The initial or pilot offering of each course is limited to no more than 25 students. Smaller class sizes make it easier to compile feedback and identify needed revisions. NCVPS then adds the course to its catalog, which already includes Arabic, French, German, Latin, Russian and Spanish.

The completed courses are published using Creative Commons licensing, making it possible for any educational organization to obtain a copy for noncommercial use. Instructional videos, transcripts, language and grammar notes and cultural components are repackaged as a digital textbook and made available for free through the LEARN NC website at www.learnnc.org .

Online Course Access
Approximately 90% of the 115 public school districts in North Carolina do not offer Chinese in a face-to-face classroom due to limited student enrollment numbers and teacher availability. Thanks to this initiative, all districts could provide a virtual Chinese program. Students access the course during a scheduled period each day on a designated computer in the media center or in a distance-learning lab. This format guarantees equitable access for all students. Generally-speaking, online courses address several

challenges faced by districts: limited staff availability, budget constraints, and student schedule conflicts. The course design addresses individual student learning styles in a unique way.

Course Structure
The scope and sequence of all courses in the series are informed by ACTFL's 5 C's, state standards and second language acquisition theory. Learning takes place in an almost totally asynchronous environment, meaning the instructor and students are not simultaneously logged in. The content is organized into thematic modules containing two or three supporting lessons. For example, the Level I modules are organized around the main theme of "Me, and My Immediate Surroundings" with sub-themes of School, Family, At Home, Activities, and Getting Together with Friends, and a cumulative theme of You and I, Are We the Same or Different?

Each lesson begins with a theme-based video vignette following the lives of two high school students. Video transcripts contain the dialogue in pinyin, simplified characters, traditional characters, and English. (Both simplified and traditional characters are included, as is the case on the AP exam, so that students can choose the one they prefer.) As pictured in Figure 1, each line of the dialogue also includes a separate downloadable audio.

Pinyin	Simplified	Traditional	English	Listen	Notes
Mǎ lì Nǐ hǎo!	玛丽 你好！	瑪麗 你好！	Mary Hello! [Hide English]	► 00:00	L1
Wáng Qiáng Nǐ hǎo!	王强 你好！	王強 你好！	[Show English]		
Mǎ lì Nǐ shìxué sheng ma?	玛丽 你是学生吗？	瑪麗 你是學生嗎？	Mary Are you a student? [Hide English]		G1, G2
Wáng Qiáng Wǒ shì xué sheng, nǐ ne?	王强 我是学生，你呢？	王強 我是學生，你呢？	[Show English]		G2
Mǎ lì	玛丽	瑪麗			

Figure 1

Students develop listening and speaking skills with an assigned conversation coach during two weekly sessions via Skype. They complete weekly written assignments and demonstrate their new language skills through projects and activities, including LinguaFolio. LinguaFolio is the formative assessment tool adapted by the National Council of State Supervisors For Languages (NCSSFL). Students use LinguaFolio to document and assess their language learning. The tool is available to all students K-16 through the NCSSFL website at www.ncssfl.org .

Interactive games, external links to Chinese language resources, and collaborative student activities provide opportunities for practice in the four language skills. Students develop their communication skills through conversations with their peers via the discussion board and Skype. Cultural comparisons, reflection activities, and self-assessment of

proficiency are collected in the Passport and Biography sections of the LinguaFolio. The Dossier section of the LinguaFolio houses coursework and other evidences of student proficiency.

Use of Technology
Listening and speaking skills are developed through a variety of technologies. Central among these is Skype, a free, voice-over-I.P. software that allows users to "call" other Skype users via the Internet in the same way a phone call would be made. Students practice newly acquired language native speakers (i.e. their conversation coaches) and with one another by using Skype. This feature has proven to be an essential component in the course. One instructor observed that students in the online course were motivated by Skype to talk to each other in Chinese outside of class time, while he struggles to get face-to-face classroom students to do the same.

Each lesson's video vignette can be viewed within the course or downloaded to a portable mp3 player, like an iPod. In addition, audio versions of each video as well as the key vocabulary of the lesson can be transferred to portable devices by students. Unlike the use of audio and video in traditional settings, students have control of how often they hear and see language input.

Headsets are issued to students at the beginning of the course. The headsets provide a more clear transmission of the course audio and voices of their conversation coach, especially in a crowded or noisy environment. Headsets are equipped with microphones that, unlike built-in computer microphones, are better suited for online conversations and recordings. These microphones are crucial for recording speaking assignments using Audacity (audacity.sourceforge.net), free, open source software for recording and editing audio.

Technology is also used to develop writing skills. Students use Microsoft Word to type pinyin, a system that uses the Roman alphabet to introduce the sounds of Chinese. The pinyin in Microsoft Word displays a list of possible characters from which the students select so that the correct meaning is conveyed. For example, to write the simple phrase 'wŏ shì ' (I am . . .), each character needs to be selected:

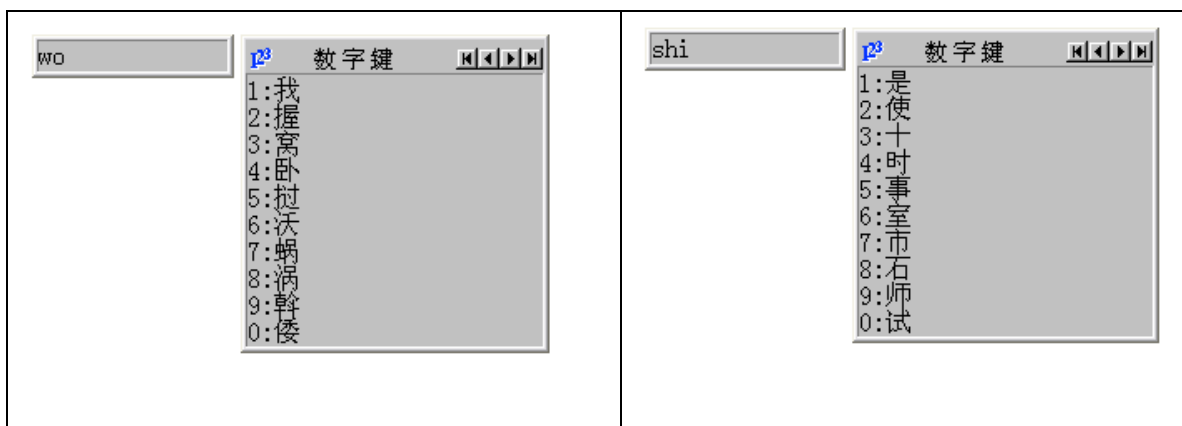| wo	123 数字键 ⏮◀▶⏭	shi	123 数字键 ⏮◀▶⏭
	1:我 2:握 3:窝 4:卧 5:挝 6:沃 7:蜗 8:涡 9:斡 0:倭		1:是 2:使 3:十 4:时 5:事 6:室 7:市 8:石 9:师 0:试

Figure 2

Students learn to write characters throughout the course, focusing on stroke order and radicals, or portions of a character that indicate meaning. Students fax or scan their handwritten work and then email it to their instructor for feedback and evaluation.

In Table 1, the characters associated with people, crowd and individuals all share a common radical 人 that establishes the meaning 'human.'

Meaning	Simplified characters	Traditional characters
People	人	人
Crowd	人群	群眾
Individuals	个人	個人

Table 1

Students combine a number of these technology tools to create multimedia presentations, which result from the project-based learning focus of the course. For example, students write scripts, rehearse them using Skype and then record their performance with Audacity.

Given the wealth of technology used in these courses, a technical support guide detailing proper configuration of hardware and software minimizes technology issues throughout the course. This document is first introduced during a webinar for school technology specialists and distance learning advisors prior to the start of the course. Together, the guide and the webinar help minimize logistical challenges unique to this course.

Role Transformations
Teaching and learning are transformed in an online language-learning environment. In a face-to-face classroom, the teacher is solely responsible for orchestrating what occurs in the classroom: instructional design, speaking practice, reinforcement activities, continuous feedback, formative and summative assessment, grade posting, classroom management, etc. However, in the online classroom, these tasks are shared by several support structures, namely technology, student services personnel, conversation coaches and the instructor.

The teacher or instructor truly becomes a facilitator. In a traditional setting, the teacher stands in front of a classroom or video camera to deliver a lecture. The online teacher focuses on providing extensive feedback to students on their weekly assignments and projects and managing the work of the conversation coaches. They monitor student progress, including discussion forum postings, online activities, collaborative work, and weekly reports from conversation coaches. Their presence is also visible in regular announcements posted within the course, and through individual communication with students using an internal messaging feature.
Conversation coaches conduct two, weekly online conversations with students using Skype. Each coach works with students individually, in pairs, or as a group, to practice

conversation skills and improve pronunciation. The coaches are directed by the instructor and report back on individual students' progress.

The Distance Learning Advisor (DLA) serves as a liaison between the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS), the provider of the online course, and the school site. The DLA may be a teacher, media coordinator or teacher assistant. They handle technology and classroom management issues that arise. The DLA also manages tasks that are specific to the local school site, like posting grades to a school's report card system, and sometimes works with students on time management and organization.

The school guidance counselor is an often overlooked stakeholder in online learning. Guidance counselors ensure that students who enroll in online classes will be successful. Experience has shown that students in an online environment need to have good organization and study skills, a willingness to take risks, and the ability to learn independently. Guidance counselors help individual students decide if online learning will work for them, through discussions and the use of a skill checklist developed by NCVPS.

Final Thoughts and Questions
Terri, like her online classmates, enrolled in the Mandarin Chinese Language course to learn how to communicate, to read, and to write Chinese. Upon sharing her decision to take the course, her friends responded with an incredulous "Why?!!" For Terri, it made no difference that the course would be offered online. What mattered was the *opportunity* to take a course that was not otherwise available at her school. She was intrigued by the options of learning at her own pace, trying something new and different, and associating herself with a cutting edge program.

In addition to what is known about successful online learners, online language learners like Terri demonstrate the intellectual curiosity to seek out opportunities for practicing what they have learned. Terri eagerly explores the web looking for additional opportunities to advance her listening and reading skills. She voluntarily uses Skype and the discussion forum to converse with her classmates around the state. She even plans to meet an online classmate from a nearby district at a local coffee shop where they will practice their Chinese. The end result is a positive association with both language learning and online learning.

Students like Terri thrive in online courses where differentiation of instruction, assessment, and content allow students to customize their path to greater proficiency. Now provided with the same course options as students in larger or more affluent districts, she is pursuing opportunities beyond high school not previously considered within her reach. Online language courses may not be an option for all students, but, for those who have the appropriate skills and the desire, online language courses offer more than the opportunity to learn a world language. They highlight learning as a social interaction that occurs outside of classroom walls and help students develop the skills to become self-directed lifelong learners.