

# Adventures in Teaching: Helping Language Teachers Discover the Joy of Teaching with Technology

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## A Gap-Fill Exercise

Today's foreign language teachers are obliged to wear many hats. In addition to the skills they must possess in teaching language, literature, and culture, they are often also expected to be competent in the use of new technologies. Innovative technologies and media are important vehicles for increasing access to information and entertainment in a foreign language, providing interaction with speakers of other languages, and improving foreign language teaching in the classroom. Thus, one increasingly vital aspect of foreign language teacher education is training in the effective use of instructional technology. However, though most educators agree on the value and importance of instructional technology, many foreign language faculty, whether new to the profession or full professors, have not received adequate training in its use, nor do they have sufficient opportunities to gain such training and experience. Though most teacher education programs include some instruction in the area of educational technology, there is simply often not enough time, with all of the other requirements for teacher certification, to offer a detailed examination of the technologies and their effective pedagogical use. Generally, instructional technology is not even the topic of an entire course, but rather is relegated to a brief glimpse as part of an educational methods class, and those schools that do offer complete courses on the topic are seldom able to focus on subject-specific applications of the technologies.

In order to fill this gap in the training of foreign language professionals, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Northern Illinois University (NIU), partnering with the Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment (ETRA), began offering the Foreign Language Instructional Technology Graduate Certificate Program in the summer of 2003. The program combines foreign language study with the development of proficiency in the use of technology, and is intended for K – post-secondary foreign language faculty. Now two years into its existence, the program is thriving and the first batch of participants is poised to complete it, while each new semester brings in new faces eager to learn and employ these new

“tricks of the trade”.

## Program Objectives

The program has the following six specific objectives:

1. To improve the quality of foreign-language graduates and to better prepare graduates for subsequent employment;
2. To offer in-service language teachers the opportunity to learn to develop and to use pedagogically sound technology applications while pursuing re-certification;
3. To work closely with faculty from the ETRA Department to teach foreign-language graduate students a new skill set;
4. To establish formal cooperative agreements with area school boards to provide them with a series of one-day training workshops in specific technological applications for language instruction;
5. To work closely with the faculty and administration of area schools and institutions of higher education to improve the quality of foreign-language instruction both in the K-12 and the post-secondary arenas throughout the Midwest region and, ultimately, throughout the nation;
6. To establish a nationally recognized model program for other universities and colleges of education.

## The Partnership

The Foreign Language Instructional Technology Graduate Certificate Program represents a unique partnership between two NIU departments. Early discussions focused on determining which classes already being offered by ETRA would provide the most beneficial elective courses to students enrolled in the certificate program and on ensuring that course scheduling would permit commuting students to attend classes in the evenings and/or during the summer months. Moreover, ETRA agreed to reserve space in those courses chosen as electives for students enrolled in the certificate program.

Subsequent conversations have focused on co-authoring grant applications and on awarding credit to ETRA graduate students for completion of certificate program courses offered through the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. At this time several students pursuing graduate degrees within the ETRA department have been able to apply their foreign language certificate program credits towards their degrees. In addition, since the inception of the program, graduate students in both departments have chosen foreign language instructional technology as the focus of their theses. The availability of courses in this area now makes this focus a viable option.

## Program Design

The program is composed of four compulsory courses in foreign language education:

FLTE 591: Integrating Technology into the Foreign Language

Curriculum;

FLTE 592: Development of Technology-Based Materials for the Foreign-Language Classroom;

FLTE 593: Foreign Language Learning Center Administration;

FLTE 594: Implementation of Foreign Language Instructional Technology (Special Projects);

and two elective courses offered by ETRA to be selected from the following list:

ETT 439: Developing Educational Software for Computers;

ETT 510: Instructional Media and Technology;

ETT 535: Distance Education: Design and Delivery;

ETT 539: Courseware Systems Development;

ETT 590: Workshop in Instructional Technology;

ETT 592: Special Topics in Instructional Technology (Software Tools for Instruction).

The foreign language department courses provide an overview of second-language acquisition theory and foreign-language teaching methodologies, along with hands-on work with a variety of instructional technologies. The main goal of the first two courses in the FLTE series is to tie together the theoretical and the practical in as cohesive a fashion as possible, so that the applications created, and the ways in which program participants utilize the technologies have a sound pedagogical foundation supported by educational research.

The third course in the program, FLTE 593, offers course participants the opportunity to learn practical aspects of working with instructional technology for language teaching. The course discusses issues involved in the administration of a large language-learning center: such as networking; hardware and software selection; creating and working with budgets; and inter-departmental cooperation. Possession of this type of knowledge is vital – even for the FL educator who has no immediate access to this type of facility – as instructors who are aware of these practicalities are much better equipped to do their own trouble-shooting, tend to have more productive relationships with technical support staff, and are better prepared to lobby for the development of such facilities in schools without them.

The last course in the FLTE series is intended to be the culmination of students' new knowledge and skill-set. Comprised predominantly of independent work, the course consists of a project proposal, development,

demonstration, and write-up. Students are to develop a pedagogical application which they will subsequently employ in their own classrooms. The course professor and the students meet approximately four times during the semester (more often if necessary) to discuss student progress, to perform any necessary trouble-shooting, and to ensure that the projects are being completed according to the timeline drawn up in the initial proposal. At the end of the semester, students report on their progress and demonstrate the uses of their application. Students having completed the program will be contacted after two semesters (one academic year) and asked to fill out a brief questionnaire – one section of which will relate to classroom use of these final projects.

## What We're Learning

As with any new venture, the Foreign Language Instructional Technology Graduate Certificate Program has undergone a maturing process in the two years since its inception. Because of the very nature of the material we examine, course content will continue to evolve as new technologies replace those we work with now, and as innovations allow us to do more with lesser-utilized applications. With each semester, too, come new students with different teaching experiences and different needs. The result is that certificate program students and instructors alike learn to be increasingly creative in their instructional strategies. Some of the most inspired ideas for problem-solving and for teaching with technology in new ways have come from the brainstorming of program students.

Students in the program have been enthusiastic about what they have learned and about the new skills they have acquired through the program. Many happily report their successes employing tools and strategies discussed in class in their own classrooms. As it is a generally-accepted fact that teachers teach the way they have been taught, we hope that the certificate program will be at least partially responsible for helping to instill in language teachers and their students an enthusiasm for what instructional technology can bring to the foreign language classroom, and that they will all profit from its inclusion in their education. ♦

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*Upon completion of her comprehensive exams at Queen's University, Jessamine began working at setting up a German language program at Middle Georgia College, a small junior college in Cochran, Georgia. The program included a distance learning component and the courses were delivered via interactive satellite broadcast to four other colleges throughout Southern Georgia. Working with technology and adapting her teaching to a distance-learning format compelled her to abandon her earlier focus on nineteenth-century German literature to begin working in the area of technology-enhanced language learning. In 1999, she took over as the Academic Director of the Ted Mimms Foreign Language Learning Center*

*at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, where she worked for three years before moving to her current position at Northern Illinois University, which provides the perfect balance between work in the Foreign Language Learning Center and teaching language and instructional technology.*

*Jessamine is currently working on a book on technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) which outlines a variety of approaches to FL education and provides comprehensive analysis of technological tools best suited to each approach. She is especially interested in electronic portfolios and alternate assessment methods and will soon finish an article on electronic portfolios in FL education.*

