

The Future of Language Learning Centers: Teacher Training Is Key to Good Lab Use

Anton T. Brinckwirth
Director, Language Learning Center
School of World Studies
Virginia Commonwealth University

Ubiquitous computing and the Internet continue to change the landscape of education at an unprecedented rate. With the advent of high bandwidth networks, E-learning, and new media, many language labs have been transformed into full-service language learning centers, integrating new technologies far beyond the traditional language lab construct. Technology has always been an important intervention in foreign language education because it facilitates communication on so many levels. Because of this, language labs will continue to evolve with technology and play a key role in language learning.

Advanced virtual labs that simulate the traditional language lab model, such as Sanako Lab 300, CAN-8, or SANS Virtuoso/Soloist, are still the centerpiece of many comprehensive language learning centers. Today's language lab systems offer user-friendly interfaces with powerful instructional tools. Still, many teachers will encounter a learning curve when attempting to implement these resources.

Teachers are usually able to learn a system's interface and functionality without much difficulty, but are overwhelmed later when they run through the activities in the real lab with real students. A typical lab session requires instructors to monitor students, navigate through a lesson, juggle the exercises, control the projector and the media sources, and stay one step ahead of the software to avoid malfunctions. It is a busy job that requires maximum focus and attention.

Virtual lab systems are designed to make language learning more dynamic and interactive. The Lab 300 and similar systems offer many possibilities for engaged learning, improved instruction, and maximum pedagogical flexibility, but ultimately the instructor is responsible for breathing life into the lab session.

These virtual labs are normally not difficult systems to learn, but it takes extensive hands-on practice to develop good skills in lab use. In order for teachers to become expert users, they must be willing to experiment with the system beyond its basic functions.

The traditional language lab is only one component of the modern language learning center. Powerful new digital media technologies are allowing teachers and students to create high quality media content appropriate for language learning. Teachers can also use the web, productivity software, online collaboration tools, language learning software, and satellite television to customize their curriculum with rich content and abundant opportunities for immersion practice. Use of sophisticated course management systems can further broaden the range of a language lab environment.

Teachers can use technology to improve the teaching and learning of language and culture across the curriculum, but there are pitfalls and other limitations to consider. Instructional technology almost always comes with a learning curve. While the curve is different for everyone, most teachers can still expect to spend a significant amount of time training and practicing to build good skills. This is not always a popular option for busy teachers.

Language departments need to train instructors in fundamental language lab mechanics if they expect them to use the lab competently, but for continued improvement in technology integration, departments need to find ways to generate enthusiasm among faculty for teaching with technology. Today's students rely on computers and technology to interact with the world and be informed about it, so it makes sense for language departments to integrate technology in the language curriculum.

In general, teachers are not hired for their technical skills, but more and more schools are encouraging teachers to use technology in the classroom to give students a 21st-century advantage. Therefore, language departments need to ensure that lab instructors are trained in order to maintain a high quality lab curriculum. Expecting non-trained instructors to teach in a language lab is absurd, but it happens all the time. When teachers lack the training and practice to teach in a language lab, the end-result will be underutilization and misuse of lab resources.

In addition to becoming familiar with the various tools and interfaces, teachers must also learn how to engage students in collaborative and communicative activities that allow students to absorb material by solving problems and creating products that reflect their

work. Most importantly, teachers must learn to multitask in the lab environment. They must be able to troubleshoot technical difficulties on the spot. Essentially, teachers need to be informed users of technology. Unfortunately, not all teachers have the time to explore even the most fundamental technology applications.

In *A Practical Guide to Using Computers in Language Teaching*, John de Szendeffy points out how daunting the language lab experience can be for instructors. Even experienced instructors can be flustered by the amount of elements involved in language lab activities. Many technologies are working in concert to facilitate the activities including hardware, software, the web, and multimedia.

Ideally, technology training will begin early in a teacher's career. It should be an integral part of all teacher education programs, regardless of specialization. Often, language teachers have limited technology skills. The bottom line is that language teachers need to be self-sufficient with technology if they want to teach successfully with technology. Teachers must learn how to make things happen on their own without relying on tech support.

Some teachers will conform to using the lower-end capabilities of high-end systems rather than taking the time to learn the advanced functions. Learning to teach with technology takes time. It is hard work. Traditional and virtual language labs are not complex systems, but teachers with limited technical skills will likely find the equipment and software difficult to manage.

Lab sessions tend to run more smoothly when teachers are comfortable at the console. In order to conduct a productive lab session, it is vital to maintain a steady rhythm and fluid timing throughout the lab session while integrating resources and avoiding glitches. Teachers and students will become frustrated quickly when technology does not function as intended. This can prompt teachers and students to lose confidence in the lab.

Traditional language labs are particularly useful in getting students to talk to one another in the target language and in allowing teachers to assess students' oral and communicative skills on the fly. Seamless interactive learning, collaborative projects, teamwork, and sharing are all easily achieved with modern language labs. However, teachers still need to nurture learning through sound lesson planning, quality instruction, engaging learning activities, appropriate testing, and frequent student assessment. The purpose of the lab is to help teachers achieve these objectives more quickly and with less effort.

Lab time should not be restricted to traditional language lab activities. Some teachers are using digital video and E-portfolios to immerse students in communicative activities in the target language to create real products that students can later reflect on. The purpose of the language lab is to engage students in these types of collaborative activities. Immersion and practice, practice, practice are the quickest paths to fluency and success.

The best way to learn a language is to live among people who speak the language. There is no instructional medium better than real immersion in the target language. The language lab provides students with a simulated experience of immersion, which is helpful to students who are unable to study abroad

The next generation of language labs will combine powerful collaborative web applications, course management tools, and network learning systems to integrate language learning software, digital media, email, instant messaging, videoconferencing and other tools designed to make students communicate and collaborate. It is only a matter of time before commercial course management systems begin integrating a virtual language lab component into their software.

From a practical standpoint, any instructional tool that helps teachers to make their students listen, understand, and interact in the target language is an appropriate use of technology in the foreign language classroom. Language teachers should want to explore new ways of utilizing instructional tools in their teaching. Many teachers became teachers because they were driven by a passion for learning. Teachers should be instinctively curious about finding new ways to improve their teaching skills. Technology can help. The language lab should be an exciting, interactive, highly exploratory experience.

While faculty should not be required to teach with technology, it is reasonable for schools and language departments to expect teachers to possess and maintain basic skills and competencies in micro-computing, digital media, course management software, and language lab applications.

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