PANEL DISCUSSION ON TEACHING JAPANESE ONLINE

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Abstract: This panel session is comprised of people who teach Japanese online at three separate institutions. Each panelist will talk about his/her own institution's motivation for establishing online courses, process of developing them, delivery method, demography of online Japanese students, outcomes, problems, solutions, and future prospects.
Keyword: Japanese, Online, Georgia Institute of Technology, Kapiolani Community College, Mesa Community College

INTRODUCTION

Delivering language courses entirely online is more challenging than teaching online courses from other disciplines because vital speaking and listening skills are very difficult to incorporate in the online environment. Especially, Japanese is one of the languages that require extra effort to convert the delivery method from traditional to online, due to the complication of the writing systems. At the same time, online Japanese courses are useful and rewarding for many students. Those who would not have been able to take Japanese courses otherwise appreciate their availability.

The objectives of this panel session are to present the current contents and situations of online Japanese courses available in the U.S., to give suggestions to people interested in starting online Japanese courses, and to promote discussions leading to improvement of the panelists' current courses. Online Japanese courses to be discussed are Georgia Institute of Technology (hereafter GT), University of Hawaii Kapiolani Community College (hereafter KCC), and Mesa Community College (hereafter MCC) in Arizona.

MOTIVATION FOR ESTABLISHING ONLINE COURSES

At GT, the development of Online Japanese courses started in 2001 as a result of a NSEP grant received by Board of Regents Office of University System of Georgia with GT as the headquarter for both development and teaching. This project targeted three less commonly taught languages (Japanese, Chinese and Russian) in Georgia and focused on developing a two-year sequence of fully credited, college-level courses delivered entirely online via the Internet. There is a statewide shortage of colleges that can teach these languages in Georgia and online courses are aimed at overcoming distance to learn the languages without physically going to the campuses where the courses are offered.

Online Japanese language instruction at KCC started in 1996 with the development of an online vocabulary practice site. The main goal was to produce a program that is not platform dependent. The use of Web was growing; therefore, it was decided to put the practice on Internet. The successful development of this site led the designer to believe that it's possible to teach Japanese totally online. The motivation for designing an online course didn't come out of a desire to fill a need for such a course, but it was the desire to see what all was possible with using advancing technology.

At MCC, beginning in 1987, the Japanese Program has been offering face-to-face Japanese courses for JPN101, 102, 201, 202 (academic track) and JPN115, 116, 225, 226, 235, 236 (conversation track). Its Japanese online versions for academic track courses

started with JPN101 in 2002. Currently MCC offers all four academic track courses online are offered in spring and fall semesters.

Motivation for Japanese online courses includes boosting enrollments, meeting students' needs such as geographic and time conflicts, and aligning with the institutional advocacy for online courses. The World Language Department, to which the Japanese program belongs, also offers French, German, and Spanish entirely online, and American Sign Language in hybrid.

PROCESS OF DEVELOPING ONLINE COURSES

At GT, the development of online courses started around 2001 and the first fully Internet-ready course was taught in 2002. WebCT Vista is the classroom management system used and is hosted by the USG server. Course materials included multimedia files (video and audio) as well animation and images. Interactivity was added by using WebCT Vista's learning tools such as multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blanks, short answers, etc. All materials were created and delivered online without any accompanying textbooks. Within two years, materials for two-year sequence were completed.

At KCC, at the time development of the online course began, in 1997, no course publishers had yet made available online resources to accompany the text. There was no one already teaching language online whom the developer could turn to for advice. Thus, the developer needed to create the online teaching environment independently. This production included all the instructional material that had to be put online. The online materials for Japanese 101 and 102 took almost one and a half years to complete.

At MCC, the "author equals instructor" model is used to develop most of online courses, while some instructors use ready-made online courses developed by publishers. The developer can get technological help from system programmers at its Center for Teaching and Learning. The school offers an opportunity of a grant to a first-timer developer of an online course, which reassigns the grantee for one-course teaching load for a semester. The grantee is also asked to participate in technology-related workshops and online learning group meeting to learn from more experienced developers and share with peer technological and course management ideas.

DELIVERY METHOD

At GT, students were required to work individually on materials stored on WebCT Vista on their own asynchronously. Initially telephone was used for speaking, but this was later replaced by an online virtual classroom tool using the VoIP technology. Currently Horizon Wimba's "Live Classroom" is used.

At KCC, because there were no course management systems available that could be used, Prof. Hiroshi Yokoyama at Akita University was kind enough to assist with the creation of the course management system called "Adagio". He is responsible for writing the program for "Adagio", while the developer provided him with the ideas. "Adagio" has been upgraded countless times since 1997 as the needs for new functions came up.

At MCC, WebCT 6.0 is the course management system used by all of Japanese online courses. Students are required to have QuickTime Player, Real Player, Purevoice, Audacity, and to have Word available. The courses also use textbooks (*Yookoso*), workbook, phone, webcam, and fax. Midterms and finals are offered in person.

DEMOGRAPHY OF ONLINE JAPANESE STUDENTS

At GT, students consist of both GT students (on-campus as well as students who are away during internship) and non-GT students in and out of Georgia. The ratio of GT to non-GT students is 8 to 2. Non-GT students need to be admitted as temporary/special students before becoming eligible to take our courses. Out-of-state non-GT students are required to pay only in-state tuition plus a $150 processing fee.

At KCC, most of students have full-time jobs making it impossible for them to come to face to face classes during the day. They also frequently have families which makes it difficult for them to attend evening classes as well. This means that online classes are either their only choice or their preferred choice.

At MCC, students are encouraged to take face to face Japanese courses, so most of the online students have reasons why they have to take the courses online. The major reasons are distance and time conflict. About 20% of the online Japanese students live out of the county and out of the state. Most of these students live in rural areas where there is no school that offers Japanese courses. Students who claim that the reason for the online course is time conflict say that none of the face to face courses offered at MCC and nearby institutions matches their schedules.

OUTCOMES

At GT, since online class students can switch between regular and online classes each semester, it is important to make sure that online students keep up their progress with regular class students. Despite the fact that the class size is very small for online classes (typically less than 10) versus regular classes (20 to 30 students), students in online classes still struggle to keep up with regular classroom students.

At KCC, the demographics of online students differ considerably from that of face to face students. Thus, it is difficult to expect the same outcomes for each of these groups of students. One difference can be seen in the final grades. Online course students seem to either do extremely well or very poorly. This may have to do with how well individual students handle the need to juggle work and family life with that of course obligations.

The number of the MCC Japanese online students has grown slowly and gradually. Some students have successfully transferred between online and face to face courses from one semester to another.   It seems to be, though, that it is easier to transfer from online course to face to face than the other way around.   However, there has not been any formal outcome assessment has been conducted to measure the success of the online courses.

PROBLEMS, SOLUTIONS, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

At GT, the audio quality of Live Classroom has improved greatly. The most problematic component yet is the virtual classroom component. This tool is sensitive to non-traditional variables such as audio-connection issues, Internet connection issues, Java compatibility, and incompatibility with software installed on students' computers. Despite good support by HW and well-documented login and preparation documents, students and instructors experience unexpected audio issues. If problems occur during class, a good part of the class is missed due to troubleshooting or the relog process. Live

Classroom may work fine one week, but then stop working the next week due to changes that happen to users' computers. Substantial frustration is felt by students when problems occur, even with backup techniques like simulcast telephone login (to the same virtual classroom without using the computer) and an archiving tool that records everything that takes place on the screen (audio and visual events) for subsequent review.

In a multi-user environment, audio lag is sometimes substantial (a few seconds each time one speaks) and this slows down class interaction. Instructors cannot determine if students are having audio lag or simply stalling or pretending to have audio problems. Even though one-way video feed is possible through this tool, instructors are reluctant to incorporate video due to fear of increasing the connection load of the virtual classroom and the risk of something going wrong.

One workaround to Live Classroom issues is to use an asynchronous voice tool -- a voice-based discussion forum. The instructor can start a new thread of topic asking questions in audio to which students are required to respond by recording their audio reply that can be reviewed by the instructor and other students for further reply much in the same way as in the text-based discussion forums.

Written homework collection, grading and return process involve other online course issues. Written homework is submitted electronically via Drop Box or Email within WebCT or faxed to the instructor. Currently, the instructor electronically marks the homework files in red and returns them via Drop Box or Email. This process is extremely time-consuming especially in case of fax submission since the faxed sheets need to be scanned manually into electronic files.

At KCC, in order to teach an online Japanese language course, both the instructor's and the students' computers need to be Japanese-ready. However, the university does not provide the tech-support to help the students set their computers up for this. As a result, the instructor has to provide students with this type of tech-support.

Another problem is that the out-of-state students need to go through the same admission procedures as in-state students. This would not be a problem except for the fact that even out-of-state students have to have TB clearance even though they will never be physically on-campus.

Because most online courses are heavily reliant on text-based designs, the developer is trying to emulate as much as possible the face to face classroom environment, which is not as text-based as many online course formats. Thus, the developer is trying out things such as the emulation of a classroom black board, class lectures that are very visual and audio in nature, etc. The instructor is even holding virtual online office hours.

At MCC, the biggest problem the online Japanese program has is a high dropping rate. More than 50% of the JPN101 students either receive an F or W (withdraw) as their grades. (Other courses show a better success rate.) The program has been improved, hoping the problem will be solved in the future. However, how effective these improvements are still as yet unknown. The strategies, derived from the student survey results, include 1) the requirement of meeting classmates in person, on the phone, or online (chat, etc.), 2) an ePortfolio project, and 3) a Kanji notebook project. The first encourages a bond among classmates in online courses so that they will feel less lonely in the online environment. The second gives online students to demonstrate the 5C's skills in Japanese. The third emphasizes the importance of the writing skill of Kanji.