

## ***Distance Delivery of Beginning Foreign Language: The Case of Czech*** **Czech in a Distance Delivery Format and Mature Learners**

### **Introduction**

This paper presents a descriptive narrative of the organization of materials used in the instruction. The class uses the Blackboard Delivery System, including an experimental feature now available, the journaling and chat.

The Nebraska Czech Language Program is one of the oldest in the US and will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2007. It is an undergraduate program in which students can minor. There are about a dozen other programs of Czech language, culture, and literature instruction in the US. Most of them serve a traditional student population and are small; smaller than at UNL. Columbia, University of Texas in Austin, UCLA, Harvard, and Princeton have graduate programs. For all of them a beginning class of over twenty students is exceptional; most classes of Czech language are much smaller.

The traditional students of Czech, therefore, are not very numerous. There are, however, people without access to in-class instruction, who are interested in learning the Czech language. To serve these non-traditional students the University of Nebraska at Lincoln is offering Beginning Czech as its first distance delivery class offered on-line beginning in the spring 2007.

The purpose of the class is to support language learning of non-traditional students and individuals geographically removed from traditional campuses. However, the whole spectrum of eligible students will be recruited. The US Midwest constitutes the primary clientele. The instructional format encourages the establishment of learning communities and cooperative learner centered instruction.

The Goals of the distance delivery class are multiple. Among the administrative goals several points are important. The class, most of all, offers instruction to non-traditional students living beyond commuting range. Each semester we receive a number of inquiries from people interested in distance delivery learning. This class, therefore is answering the national call for such classes of a less commonly taught language. The Czech program is small and is in constant fight for enrollment. A distance delivery class becomes, therefore, a recruiting tool for our program and by extension for our institution.

The Czech program plays an important role in the maintenance of the ethnic cultural traditions in the Great Plains. The class availability on the Internet, hopefully, will strengthen ties within ethnic communities, through formation of learning groups.

This class offers opportunities for research. The electronic format allows statistical analysis and comparison of student testing results in the face to face class, and the distance delivery one. The electronic material can be shared and facilitate collaboration with other teachers, indeed, facilitate the sharing of materials world wide.

The most ambitious aim is to find a content form that is a compromise between authentic language and language appropriately modified for student levels. And last but not least the establishing of the natural learners' syllabus. It is an additional goal to find new approaches and understanding through on-line teaching which can then be used to improve on-campus instruction as well.

### **Recent History**

Foreign language classrooms have opted to use the Internet as a resource almost from the beginning of its existence. The foreign languages (FL) programs have been

using Internet as a source for authentic information about resources, authentic communication in the form of e-mail, applications, and even sharing of original materials. For over 30 years foreign language instructors had been calling for authentic materials and the Internet provided an abundance of them available at the finger tips.<sup>1</sup> The Internet provides cultural information ready to use for authentic tasks all within the four walls of the classroom.<sup>2</sup> For more than a decade now the community of foreign language teachers has been engaged in praising the Internet's ability to make foreign language teaching more authentic, because it presents to the students the language, native speakers use. The Internet offers tasks that students would be required to perform during a stay in the country, such as finding the time for their train departure, the price for tickets to performances, the address of student hostels, and other needs a foreign visitor is likely to encounter. Even more important is that the Internet provides an easy opportunity for teachers to keep up with language changes.

Not only the language class, but also the literature class has been changed and enriched by the Internet. Many sites give not only excerpts and translations in several versions, but furnish pictures from performances, films, and TV programs. The news concerning events that just happened allow students and teachers alike to follow the cultural atmosphere, politics, and even the everyday life of the native speakers of the language studied.

Many teachers do not invent materials for class instruction any more, rather they use the Internet resources to tailor materials to the needs of the class, and indeed, of the individual students. Music majors might be interested in the production of musical

compositions. Mathematicians search for vocabulary that the average foreign language teacher cannot furnish in the typical classroom.

Many teachers, however, have held back on the use of other technology in the foreign language classroom for a variety of reasons. For years, the fonts of foreign languages were incompatible with programs, such as Acrobat, scanning, html, e-mail, and others, available in the US. The situation improved, although it is still not as yet satisfactory.

There is also a wide range in the knowledge of platforms, and platform availability among students in general, and in particular among students in online courses.

*Computer delivery platforms* that were conceived in 1980, and introduced in 1997 simplify the teaching and authoring tasks. The learning of such authoring tools is becoming easier. The adoption by universities of an integrated delivery platform such as Blackboard, WebCT, Desire2Learn, or Angel bring many user-friendly functions that facilitate teaching and testing material preparation and their delivery to the students. In addition, such platforms integrate campus administrative spheres as well. For example the enrollment of a student shows up automatically in the virtual Blackboard class space, the attendance portion of a grade is calculated automatically, tests and self-assessment exercises can have time limits, review of incorrect answers, links to information that explain the material, etc. Specifically from the teacher's point of view, it is important to notice that the Blackboard delivery platform requires minimal technical expertise that takes no more than two to three weeks to master. The software allows the linkage of classes, recycling of materials from year to year, and gradual building of teaching

resources like quizzes, articles, annotated readings, clips, library reserves, scanned-in articles, film clips, music excerpts, links to outside materials produced with other programs such as Moodle, Hot Potato, and World Wide Web Internet links.

The University of Nebraska at Lincoln takes part in the testing of the new versions of Blackboard. Thanks to that, it has a direct channel of communication with the company concerning any needs for improvements and problem solving. This connection proved to be useful when we found out that we could not communicate in foreign languages such as Czech, Russian and Japanese in the *Journal Tools*.. We asked the Blackboard administrator for help, and within a week the tools were modified and students were able to type in Czech for journaling (in Word format). We are now asking for recording ability for students to narrate a part of their journals (in Czech). In essence we have become one of the major actors in the teaching community exploring the promise of delivery platform technology.

### **Materials**

The content taught is that of survival/essential level. It stresses the students' recognition of communicative language structures such as vernacular speech, intonation, administrative exchanges and polite deference. Depending on the type of students that will enroll in the class, it has space for customization (i.e. replacing modules of similar difficulty with a different content of the same language level.) For example, genealogy can be replaced by rules for expected behavior during meal sharing. The course includes links to authentic Internet sites for Czech learning foreigners as well as for native Czechs, such as the National Airport in Prague. These seem to be really appreciated by students.

We are in the process of exploring teaching format and content opportunities offered by the Internet environment.

We use materials authored by Mila Saskova-Pierce and Layne Pierce and do not have, therefore, any problems with copyright. The course uses also the Czech Radio cultural and language materials authored by Pavla Horáková.<sup>3</sup> They deal with the social behavior of Czechs, social deference, precedence rules, food, and other subjects. The treatment is light and humorous and students like it. The vocabulary introduced has embedded sound and pictorial presentation. It is, however, appropriate only for the beginning level of instruction, since it is in English with occasional Czech words embedded in the text.

### **Language Skills**

The learning of a language requires the acquisition of five skills delivered in a context of the semantics of culture. In what modality can these be delivered in a distance format?

There are two receptive skills - listening and reading comprehension. The two productive skills are writing and speaking. Grammar (morphosyntax) constitutes the fifth skill which we call a procedural skill. It allows the speaker to construct and to reconstruct the meaning of the foreign discourse. In addition the socio-cultural dimension of speakers' behavior is taught in the form of rules for socially appropriate communication. It, of course, is learned when students practice in the cultural context, with the appropriate context. For example the use of honorifics, formal addresses, and even rules for academic prose and footnotes.

The reading, listening, writing, and grammar can be delivered over the Internet. Reading over the Internet, as we found out, however, needs to be accompanied by sound, since in the absence of the native pronunciation, students give the written material their own English-like pronunciation. Unlike the classroom, where the teacher can correct the students when they read, students of Czech in our pilot course acquired an awful foreign accent. They did learn authentic vocabulary, mainly thanks to the fact that our course incorporated Internet resources from the very beginning, but the initial pronunciation made it difficult for native speakers to understand them. Listening, on the other hand, was well assimilated thanks to the great number of artificial and/or simplified dialogues, and quasi authentic exchanges rerecorded at a slower speed. The expectation that there would be a transfer of between the listening and speaking skills did not materialized. Therefore, we have instituted mandatory oral examinations.

Writing is the other active skill that the class practices. Students write weekly journals in the space provided in the Blackboard. The journals are visible to all the other students and can be corrected at any time. This is based on previous research that established a productive link between writing and speaking ability. Students are invited to participate in chat sessions that use written exchanges. The chat function allows direct typing using Czech alphabet, and at least a part of the chat is done in Czech.

Grammar is drilled in exercises that recycle the lexical thematic units as well as the themes in the reading and writing exercises. The grammatical drills use mainly fill in and multiple choice formats.

Written quizzes in the form of practice quizzes are used for self assessments. They are followed by the graded quizzes of the same format. They assess the receptive

skills reading and listening comprehension, and writing. They also assess the work with reading about cultural topics.

Speaking proficiency assessment is a problematic area, and constitutes the most important need for practice in a distance delivery course. We are using several formats for the assessments. For one-on-one exams we use phone contacts. For independent work we use the Blackboard Breeze function in the form of Power Point. Students record their answers to questions, or a part in a partial dialogue. The format is alternating slides: one recorded by the native speaker, and the second one blank on which the students record their answers. Students can rerecord their speech as many times as they wish within the two days the function is open for them. They can also practice the repetition drills we all remember from our foreign language learning.

Blackboard is at the present time working on a program that will allow the recording of parts of the weekly journals in voice by the students as well.

The synchronous communication is what makes this class a class. The Blackboard chat function accommodates Czech letters and because of its importance in the learning process, the chat participation is required and graded. Subjects and themes, and times for the weekly chat are assigned. The chat will also take place in the Breeze chat room that has space for camera. An oral exam will be part of the mid term and final exams and it will be conducted with the help of BREEZE.

The demands on the bandwidth, however, make it important that only students with access to a broadband connection enroll in the class.

### **Blackboard functions used in English**

The calendar, announcements and e-mail used mainly for administrative communication between the teachers and students are in English, mainly because Yahoo and Hotmail do not support foreign fonts at this time, not does Lotus Notes provided to our students and teaching staff by our university.

The Discussion Board (Water Cooler) is used for problems students have with the materials, format of the exercises, or grammatical explanations. In short this is the space to communicate about the learning and the material content. Everybody is required to take a part and everybody is encouraged to offer answers to the problems.

### **Learning community format**

The students who are enrolled in the class are beyond driving distance of the Lincoln campus. In addition to students in their twenties, there are also mature learners who are involved in the Czech community life in the state of Nebraska.

In the future we hope to attract people interested in learning the language for the study of genealogy, tourism, every day and epistolary communication with their relatives in the Czech Republic, and for the teaching of Czech language to their children and grandchildren in the form of age appropriate games.

The course will group students into communities depending on the geographical location. Students who do not have anybody in a geographical proximity will be paired with other people with whom they are required to discuss assignments, and work on projects such as slide presentations. Their responsibility to another student will make sure they have the support of classmates and do not disappear in the anonymity of the Internet

space. Ideally the students who can meet physically with another student will be asked to meet once a week and work on their assignments. They will be required to communicate the results of their physical or virtual sessions to the teacher.

## **Conclusion**

Beginning Czech in Distance Delivery answers the national call for Internet classes of less commonly taught languages by communities that are beyond commuting distance from an institution that offers them.

The learning community format can strengthen ties within ethnic organizations.

Such a class constitutes only a first step within generalizes plans for Internet delivery. Another plan in making is to offer Czech language materials on the server of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs that will be available to teachers all over the world. Czech communities in the former Yugoslavia, in Ukraine, in Russia and Kazakhstan are hoping for a quick development of such site.

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<sup>1</sup> Hancock, Charles. Creating an Effective Foreign Language Classroom. 07-00-1994.

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<sup>2</sup> These authentic tasks are far superior to simulation tasks, because they are aimed at the native population, and do not have the limitations and artificiality of the tasks devised by teachers.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.radio.cz/en/current/abc>, accessed February 23, 2007