Chapter Five
Teacher Preparation for Online Instruction

* Understanding the Online Environment Limitations and Advantages for Language Teaching and Learning
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One of the main objectives of STARTALK is to increase the number of highly effective teachers for critical languages. In the 21st century, technology-enhanced education will become the norm. Language teachers need to prepare themselves to teach in both traditional classroom-based settings as well as online blended settings.

The one-on-one instructional design of the post-summer program will presumably require recruiting and training many experienced instructors, but there will likely be a shortage of qualified online instructors. As of the summer of 2017, only a handful of STARTALK teacher programs address online instruction. In order to implement blended, personalized instruction and accommodate the demand for quality online teachers, it is critical for STARTALK teacher programs to add online instruction training to the teacher preparation agenda.

For the past decade, Hunter College has included online instruction content and an online instruction practicum in our STARTALK teacher training program. After teacher trainees complete the STARTALK teacher program, they are hired to teach STARTALK students during the post-summer program. This chapter is a description of the online teacher training program that was developed at Hunter College. It is by no means a perfect design, but it can serve as an example. STARTALK program directors and lead instructors can adjust the training content to suit their local situations. A more refined design will be generated through the collaboration of the STARTALK community.

When designing an online teacher training program, it is very important to base teaching standards on the STARTALK instructional principles. These principles will facilitate language acquisition and should be applied to all teaching environments regardless of face-to-face or online instruction. Thus, it is essential for online instructors to attend a STARTALK teacher program to first become familiar with the STARTALK principles. These principles include:

- Standards-based and thematically organized curriculum
- Learner-centered instruction
- Use of the target language for at least 90% of class time
- Comprehensible input
- Integrating language, culture, and content
- Age-appropriate authentic materials
- Performance-based assessment (PBA)

Below is a description of the key training items for online instructors.

**Understanding the Online Environment Limitations and Advantages for Language Teaching and Learning**

The purpose of this training is to introduce the basics of the selected online teaching platform to teacher trainees. As previously mentioned, it would be ideal to select teacher trainee candidates from the STARTALK summer program to serve as post-summer online instructors. Even if new instructors must be selected, they must also be involved in the training tutorial. The computer tutorial would be best conducted in person at a computer lab as a half-day, face-to-face workshop during the summer session. If no lab is available, teachers should be asked to bring in their own laptop computers. If face-to-face training cannot be arranged at all, the program can still provide a detailed handbook that shows how to use the LMS, with a video link illustrating regularly used functions. It would also be beneficial to provide a FAQ on how to solve simple and common technical issues. The handbook and the video should be available throughout the program for teachers to access as a quick reference guide.

Before the training tutorial, the program should create accounts for teachers to access the online platform. During the tutorial, teachers should test their account logins to ensure that they work properly. After teachers are successfully logged in, they should review the asynchronous features of the LMS by exploring hands-on activities to create announcements, assignments, assessments,
and so forth. Teachers also need to understand how to operate the synchronous functionalities of the virtual classroom. This part of the training session can focus on how to upload images and videos, highlight sections of the shared screen space, type text on both the whiteboard and in the designated text area, toggle the camera and audio devices, etc. The tutorial can also show the limitations and advantages of the online environment from a pedagogical point of view, such as the pros and cons of using live video (teachers and students seeing each other versus the teacher and/or student using audio only).

During the training tutorial, it would be beneficial to review program standards and policies. Teachers should be aware of proper protocols when it comes to issues such as reporting technical problems, students missing class, wait time for tardy students, communication with parents, weekly learning reports for program supervisors and students, weekly meetings with staff, teacher responsibilities, observations, and teacher evaluation criteria.

At the end of the tutorial, teachers can complete a run-through with other teacher trainees from home using the equipment they intend to use for online teaching and learning. This will enable teacher trainees to test if they can hear and see each other in the virtual classroom, and to practice using the tools discussed. Finally, teachers should set up a trial session with students to ensure functionality on all aspects of the platform.

Creating Personalized Instructional Plans

Because the post-summer program is designed to provide personalized instruction, it requires teachers to have a deep understanding of each learner. This could be facilitated through a student survey of interests and learning needs, and through interviews with students to discuss the goals and purposes of learning the language. Teachers should also review assessment outcomes such as Linguafolio material and proficiency test results.

The training to prepare personalized learning plans should begin with definitions of the ACTFL proficiency ratings and corresponding text types and language tasks, as well as what it means to teach using proficiency-based instruction. Teachers should go over the proficiency targets in each modality. Watching student language output samples provided by ACTFL is helpful in giving archetypes for each level, so that teacher trainees learn to determine what the proficiency rating is for a language sample. Teachers then can go over the current proficiency levels for each learner they will be teaching and fine-tune reasonable proficiency targets in each of the modalities. This is a critical step for personalized instruction because effective teaching should help students build on their language skills, and not simply teach at or below their current proficiency levels.

Keeping a detailed student learning profile is an essential component of personalized instruction. (See Appendix A for an example.) The teacher will update the student profile throughout the learning process of the program. The profile will document a student’s weekly online class attendance, performance, assignment completion and quality, yearly proficiency scores, instructional materials used in class, and assignment materials used after class. Student profiles should be accessible online for all teachers to review. The weekly study plans will be designed based on each individual student’s needs, and adjusted based on language goal performance from previous lessons.

Student profile information can be collected using an online Google or other LMS form where both teachers and students post their reflections each week. At the beginning, middle, and the end of the post-summer session, a mini-conference must be conducted online to inform all stakeholders what the learning proficiency goals are for each of the modalities, and to suggest how to improve weak areas.
Classroom Interaction in a Virtual Environment

In the virtual environment, the video camera is optional. Sometimes, high school students do not wish to be seen and this option may be granted. (Sometimes, teachers do not wish to be seen either.) The program can decide whether video should be used by both students and teachers. Teachers may want students on video so they can monitor if a student is attentive in class (i.e. not multi-tasking) or to make sure that students are not obtaining quiz answers elsewhere. If teachers are communicating through video, they may find that due to lag or delay students may not receive the intended nonverbal feedback cues such as smiling, nodding, or eye contact that teachers use in classroom-based instruction. Audio delay can affect timely verbal feedback from teachers as well. A wait time of a few seconds in a virtual environment may feel much longer than the actual time.

Because audio and video delays can lead to frustration and a breakdown in effective communication, teachers should find alternate ways to let students know they are paying attention. Text transmits faster than audio and video, so it is important for teachers to become comfortable using different ways to provide “visible” feedback, such as emojis or text on the whiteboard or in the textbox to supplement verbal feedback.

Teachers should ask students to turn off any other audio or multimedia programs on their computer during instructional sessions. If the internet connection is slow, students should ask family members to stay off-line while they are in class. The online session should be conducted in a quiet place by both teacher and student, with no interference from background or household noises. Both teachers and students must wear headsets to further avoid background noise.

Providing Delayed Feedback in a Virtual Environment

One of the major advantages of one-on-one instruction is that students can receive abundant and immediate feedback, which is conducive to language acquisition. Concurrent feedback, or feedback that is provided at the same time the skill is displayed, is important to the success of the virtual classroom. However, due to the technical issues mentioned above, teachers can also take advantage of giving detailed delayed feedback. This is defined as a period of time between the skill performance and feedback. Performing an error analysis would be ideal for instances of delayed feedback.

Some online platforms allow teachers to record students’ performances across different language tasks and subsequently compile an error analysis to post to each student. The error analysis should not be too trivial - only patterned errors should be pointed out and addressed. Students should be able to notice where the errors are and be asked to correct the errors themselves. Afterwards, students should be asked to perform the same language tasks until they can do them accurately and fluently without help. To reinforce a lesson, teachers can modify tasks to suit slightly different situations to allow students additional practice. It is important to note that it is not easy to provide feedback for pronunciation or tones online. It might be necessary to use alternative methods (such telephone calls or offline recordings) where the audio quality may be higher.

To provide feedback for students’ writing output, teachers can post students’ writing on the whiteboard with highlighted areas that need to be corrected. Teacher trainers should discuss other ways to provide feedback in the virtual environment with teacher trainees. Video clips should be collected to demonstrate these feedback strategies.
Giving Instructions in a Virtual Environment

Due to the technical limitations in audio and video transmission, it is important for teachers to put down instructions in a visual text format (e.g., on a PPT slide) to clearly show students what to do and to supplement verbal instructions. Teachers need to find a way to break down a task into smaller segments so that there is only one simple instruction for students to focus on at a time. Instructions for activities can be written on the PPT in English and the target language at the beginning of the semester, gradually removing the amount of English used over time. If verbal instructions are provided, it should be consistent with the wording used on the PPT. If there is more than one item (e.g. pictures, vocabulary words, or questions) on a PPT slide, it is best to number the items to help students identify what is being discussed.

Teaching Demos, Observations, and Critique Sessions

It is recommended that sample videos of real online sessions be used to show teacher trainees how to conduct an online session. After teacher trainees watch the video, ask them to comment on the effectiveness of the instructional strategies, what could be used in their own teaching, and what pitfalls to avoid. Here are some links to sample videos:

Online session sample focused on speaking instruction

Three online sessions focused on literacy instruction: Session 1; Session 2; Session 3

After the discussion of the sample video, teacher trainees should be given an opportunity to teach volunteer students for 20 minutes or so. This teaching should be recorded and observed by their peers online, if possible, with a discussion being conducted after each teaching session. Observation criteria will include effectiveness of using online teaching tools, effectiveness of giving feedback, effectiveness of giving instructions, and effectiveness in conducting teaching activities.

Understanding How to Use Asynchronous Materials

Online instructors must know what materials are available for students to do self-paced, out-of-class learning. During the training sessions, teachers should be introduced to the difficulty levels of these materials and the types of skills needed to use them. This will help them assign materials appropriate to the proficiency level of their learners.

Both online instructors and students should understand the purpose of asynchronous learning. If possible, it would be helpful to organize different types of materials into learning modules and present a sample schedule to keep students on track. Online instructors also need to be trained on how to assess students after they finish a learning module, and how to conduct a follow-up PBA online. Assessment results must be made available to both instructors and students, and should to be used to adjust future instruction.

Assessment in a Virtual Environment and Understanding Assessment Tools

Online instructors must learn how to conduct assessments in the virtual space. Interpersonal PBA can be conducted online that indicate whether each transaction has been conducted successfully, most likely taking the form of a student doing role plays with an instructor. Instructors can rate the performance of students using a detailed rubric.

With the advancement of technology, teachers can use numerous online tools to conduct quizzes, tests, and proficiency assessments online. It is a good idea to conduct an end-of-learning module assessment to see if students have acquired the
encourage collaboration and sharing

Building an Effective and Lasting Online Instruction Team

Programs that want to build a successful post-summer component are going to have to make adjustments to streamline procedures and evaluate online instructors. If there are many students within a specific group, or if there is some student attrition throughout the term, the coordinator can reorganize or reassign students to make the distribution of instructors more equitable. New instructors should learn about evaluation criteria during their training. It is also important to let online instructors know that there are opportunities for career advancement and promotion. Coordinators should identify capable teachers and assign them more responsibilities. For example, if your program has multiple levels, it might be a good idea to promote more experienced teachers to act as lead instructors for each level. Knowing what opportunities are available ahead will encourage online instructors to stay and return to teach in subsequent years. Program leadership might also want to consider giving online teachers extra pay for session preparation, administrative work, and attendance at staff meetings.

Finally, there should be a program support system so that online instructors never feel they are on their own. For example, the program can host weekly meetings so that online instructors can communicate with lead instructors or group leaders to ask questions or bring up concerns. Continuing to cultivate teacher knowledge is important to improve the quality of instruction. For sustained success, programs need to have capable teachers with professional knowledge as well as good communication skills.