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Book review

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Falsgraf, C. (Ed.) (2007). *Foreign language units for all proficiency levels*. Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). 262 pp. ISBN 9781564842220, \$11.20 (paperback)

In our society, technology is more than a passing fancy or the stuff of science fiction; technology is behind almost every aspect of how we live our lives. It has also become an integral part of discussions in education. How do we use technology to help our students learn more effectively and efficiently? How do we use technology to assess our students' progress? How do we use technology, period, "Is this the *on* switch?" And how do we pay for all of this?

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has developed a series of several books to promote the incorporation of technology and the use of NETS-S (National Education Technology Standards for Students) in several disciplines, including Foreign Languages. In *Foreign Language Units for All Proficiency Levels*, Carl Falsgraf and his collaborators make a strong case for the use of technology in foreign language classrooms at the PK-12 level. The book itself is divided into two distinct sections; the first comprises a series of five essays on the subject of technology in foreign language education, while the second part presents several practical examples by means of 12 thoroughly and expertly developed resource unit plans.

### **Technophobia?**

The topics covered in the five essays include the following: the role of technology in promoting proficiency, technology and the Foreign Language Standards, using technology for performance based assessment, distance learning, and helping students and teachers surf the Internet. In the first essay, Falsgraf states: "Most language teachers come to the field with training in literature and language, not technology" (p. 11). To support his case, he gives examples from literature (Mary Shelley and Jules Verne) of technology gone wrong and technology misunderstood. He then leaves the realm of literature and moves to popular culture when he proposes that, in applying technology in our classrooms, "[w]e are like Luke Skywalkers: We are willing to use whatever low-tech or high-tech tools are at our disposal to accomplish our mission. May the Force be with you!" (p. 13).

We assume from this quote that he is talking about the "Light Side" of the Force; however,

many view technology as definitely coming from the “Dark Side.” Fear of the unknown is often great regarding technology; in the first paragraph of his essay, Falsgraf specifically mentions the fear felt by many that technology will take over their lives (p. 11). We might ask, who in foreign language education suffers from this fear? In contrast to Falsgraf’s remarks that most foreign language teachers are not trained in technology when they begin teaching, a 2007 NCES report indicates that all of the teacher preparation programs at 4-year post-secondary institutions under the jurisdiction of Title IV require technology proficiency. Therefore, Falsgraf’s comments may not apply to novice foreign language teachers, but rather to their counterparts on the other end of the spectrum.

In reference to a teacher shortage, Andrews and Martin (2003) state that a “generation of veteran teachers is approaching retirement age” (p. 3). In a recent survey (Kohl, 2005) of the professional development needs of K-12 foreign language and ESL teachers in North Carolina, over 35% of participants reported themselves to be 50 years of age or more. In this same study, almost half (48.1%) of teachers indicated a high or very high need for professional development activities on using technology. These data on a large population of experienced teachers, coupled with their lack of professional development in this area, perhaps clarify why technology may not be used as often in the foreign language classroom as Falsgraf would like.

However, Falsgraf does clearly understand the purpose of foreign language teaching. He states, “Our mission is proficiency: every student able to communicate meaningful content in realistic contexts...The best--the most appropriate--use of technology in the second language classroom is to provide authentic, contextualized interactive tasks with members of a target language speech community” (p. 13). To Falsgraf, technology in the foreign language classroom is the means to this end. “Technology can help us become efficient enough to individualize instruction, to plan for proficiency, to measure student’s progress toward the goal of communicating effectively in realistic situations” (p. 15).

### **Instruction through technology or instruction in technology?**

In the next essay, Kyle Ennis discusses technology and its relationship to ACTFL’s Standards for Foreign Language Learning, also commonly known as the “Five Cs” (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities). Regarding the Five Cs, he comments “...[S]ome may ask: why five Cs and not six? Why have ‘Computers’ not been added to the model? Shouldn’t technology be included in these standards for foreign language learning?” (p. 18). At first, to someone who wholeheartedly believes in the Standards, the concept of “adding Cs” may be disturbing; however, Ennis elaborates on what he really believes about the role of technology in the Standards. He explains how technology fits into the Standards, addresses the concern that content will become less important than technology, and describes how good foreign language instruction can help students to meet both the Five Cs and NETS-S without taking away from content instruction.

In my opinion, there are two possible ways to view technology in foreign language education. The first is as an instructional tool. This view is conducive to meeting the Standards, and would allow teachers to use technology to achieve the goals outlined in the Five Cs. It is important to remember that an instructional tool is only as good as the instruction behind it; requiring a class blog versus requiring paper journals could be equally good or bad, depending on the quality of the writing prompts instructors create for both media. We must be cautious about using technology for technology’s sake. This point is not specifically made by Ennis, but is discussed by Oleksak and Riordan and by Tollefson in their respective chapters. Oleksak and Riordan stress the importance of quality of instruction and technology by quoting LeLoup (2003): “More important than the use of technology per se is the quality

of what is done with this medium. A badly conceived interactive task or activity is poor whether it is done on a computer or face to face” (p. 36).

The second view is one of technology as an independent discipline (Information Technology). This is also applicable to the Standards, specifically the “Connections” Standard, in that students could learn about Information Technology using the target language and culture. The first view is more commonly held, and is the one promoted by Ennis in his essay. He states, “At the heart of the technology standards is the ideal that technology education is not about 'learning how to use computers,' but rather, how we can use technology...in a way that supports teachers in meeting their goals and assists students in accomplishing meaningful tasks” (p. 25).

### **Technology-facilitated assessment**

The third essay by Rita Oleksak and Kathleen M. Riordan describes the importance of technology in assessing students and in collecting and managing data. The authors give an excellent overview of performance-based assessments and the criteria for developing them, citing several other researchers. They state, “Performance-based assessment is authentic and realistic and it incorporates real-world tasks” (p. 29). The authors also assert that technology has an important role in performance-based assessment. “Technology allows us to access current real-life print, video and audio, establishing a realistic context for the task. . . .Access to technology opens the doors for presentational communication” (p. 31). Oleksak and Riordan stress that technology is a valuable aid in giving individualized and effective feedback to students “in an atmosphere that is more supportive and allows for growth” (p. 31). The importance of professional development for foreign language teachers in using technology for instruction and for assessment is also highlighted.

Oleksak and Riordan go on to give a case study from their school system in Springfield, Massachusetts and their use of the STAMP (Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency) assessment program from 2002 to date. STAMP is a system of on-line foreign language speaking, reading, and writing assessments. In the case of the Springfield school system, STAMP was used to assess the reading and writing proficiency of eighth grade foreign language students and high school students in level two foreign language courses. According to the authors, the data teachers receive back about their students' performance is the most powerful aspect of STAMP. These data allow teachers and school systems to make changes that positively impact curriculum development, day to day instruction, and, ultimately, students' proficiency.

In addition to relating the success of their system in using STAMP, the authors give a list of other computerized assessment options, such as COPI, DIALANG, MLPA, OWLTS and WebCAPE. They include a chart comparing these and other frequently used language assessments on a number of criteria, including availability, validity, assessment of the four skills, and whether or not they include a professional development component. This chart would be helpful to those evaluating assessment programs as it offers an “at-a-glance” overview of the main features of each program.

### **Distance Learning: Course enrichment or delivery?**

In Chapter Four, Ann Tollefson discusses the issue of Distance Learning and foreign language education. She distinguishes between Distance Learning and Distributed Learning. She defines Distributed Learning as the technology-based ancillaries that often accompany textbooks or that teachers collect on their own. Distributed Learning does not allow for students to interact with the materials in unlimited ways. With Distance Learning, on the other hand, “the student is able to

communicate with, ask questions of, and actively negotiate meaning with a teacher or other learners who may be at a different location or who may participate at a different time” (p. 42).

According to Tollefson, Distance Learning is thought of in one of two ways: Either it is the sole method of delivery of a course, or it is used to enrich a course. She states, “In both, technology is the great leveler, bringing equity of access to language learners regardless of where they live” (p. 42). The author continues by describing the needs of students in remote parts of the country or in small school systems where there are not enough teachers or students to make the traditional, face-to-face class feasible.

In this section, Tollefson brings up a very interesting point, in that most teachers are more than willing to see Distance Learning as a means of enriching their face-to-face classes, but they feel threatened by the notion of delivering an entire foreign language course using technology via an on-line course, a satellite course, or an interactive video course. Tollefson attributes this ambivalence toward distance learning to the fear of being “replaced.” I also believe that foreign language teachers are more often hesitant because they are not convinced that Distance Learning is as effective as a face-to-face course.

The next section of this chapter is devoted to providing enrichment by means of Distance Learning. Tollefson gives several practical examples of how to use distance learning in “linking learners to information, activities and other students around the world” (p. 45), such as research, keypals, exploratory courses, project-based learning, and WebQuests. She provides URLs of helpful websites and describes in detail projects that teachers have done using each example given above. She also explains that Distance Learning provides new and more varied professional development opportunities for teachers in both urban and remote settings. Tollefson asserts that these opportunities are time-saving and cost efficient for both teachers and school systems.

### **Using Web resources to enhance teacher learning and student learning**

Along with mentioning how the Web might be used for Distance Learning, Tollefson also promotes teacher networking through electronic forums and listservs, which serve as vehicles for teacher collaboration. Collaboration may be a good means of lessening feelings of isolation among teachers. Kohl (2005) found that almost 75% of ESL and foreign language teachers who participated in her study indicated a high or very high level of interest in collaborating with other teachers in their discipline. Electronic networking may be the answer to encouraging teachers to develop professional relationships with each other for the purpose of improving instruction. Tollefson also gives examples of websites for several organizations and agencies dedicated to second language teaching.

The final essay by Walter McKenzie gives useful tips to help teachers and students more effectively search the Web. McKenzie describes the various search tools that are available and also discusses how to develop an efficient search strategy. Finally, he stresses the importance of evaluating the quality of websites and gives advice for doing so.

### **From discussion to practical application: Resource unit plans**

The second part of the book includes twelve resource units developed from three initiatives: the MOSAIC Project (University of Oregon), the CoBaLTT Project (University of Minnesota), and the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center (Iowa State University). The units are geared towards middle and high school students of French, Japanese and Spanish, although there is also a unit for elementary school students (“Yo soy el agua”). The authors make clear that the units may easily be

adapted to other grade-levels, including post-secondary education.

Each unit plan gives the foreign language Standards and NETS-S met through the unit, explicit instructions for presenting each lesson in the unit, how the unit connects to other disciplines, the technology needed for the unit, and rubrics for evaluating the unit in an appendix. A CD included with the book gives supplemental material for the units, including handouts and links to on-line resources. This remarkable section of the book truly provides a wealth of high-quality teaching resources for foreign language teachers.

### **Digital equity?**

So often in education, we are told that we should do something but never told *how* to do it. *Foreign Language Units for All Proficiency Levels* is thoughtful and sensitive in its presentation of issues regarding the use of technology in foreign language classes. Its authors practice what they preach in terms of making the information accessible, practical, relevant and hands-on. The resource units alone are a goldmine. Even if teachers who read the book do not use the exact unit plans given in the book, there is enough information and quality modeling that they should gain the confidence to develop unit plans of their own.

The only important issue not explicitly addressed is the issue of digital equity. ISTE released a report and held a summit as recently as the summer of 2007 to discuss the issue of digital equity, and so I was surprised that the issue was not included in this book. Although great strides have been made so that there is now Internet access in almost 100% of schools nationwide, and although the ratio of students per school computer has decreased from 12.1 to 1 in 1998 to 3.8 to 1 in 2005 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), there are still technology access issues in the school setting and beyond. For example, until the ratio of student to computer in schools is 1 to 1, sharing computers (and other technology) with colleagues can cause scheduling conflicts and limit the amount of time that teachers have to use available resources. Teachers may have to reorganize their curricula based on when they can get into the computer lab or when the digital camera is free. In addition, assigning technology-based homework can be difficult, as students have varied access to technology at home and in the community outside of school. Students may have to complete all technology-related work during school hours, which would place a further drain on already limited resources. A section on overcoming some of these challenges would be a welcome addition to this otherwise excellent book.

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