An Overview of the Student-to-Student Chinese Language Learning Lab

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Abstract— **This paper represents a report of mid-term results of a United States Department of Education funded International Research and Studies Program project: The Student to Student Chinese Language Lab. This paper gives a summary of the Lab, a brief assessment of related theory and research, measures of learning, as well as a critical evaluation of other existing resources. We conclude that the lab provides critical additional benefits beyond similar, existing resources.**

Keywords - Language; Chinese; Online Technology; Language Lab.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our Lab is a novel Mandarin Chinese language and cultural resource for primary and secondary schools that offers curricular structure, dynamic multimedia content, opportunities for teacher and student input, and mechanisms for interaction. The Lab also offers the distinctive motivational factor of learning from age-matched peers who speak the target language as a first language. This student-to-student feature creates a powerful learning nexus that creates a personal and meaningful context critical for second language acquisition. The Lab also provides an 'indirect communication' approach that allows teachers to bypass typical difficulties associated with 'direct communication,' such as time differences, cultural differences regarding value and expectations, inappropriate student input and a tendency to stray from the curriculum. At the same time, the Lab is associated with opportunities for direct teacher-monitored student interaction. Furthermore, the project pioneers a new learning model that utilizes modern communications technology to promote mutual understanding and cooperation, and can potentially be replicated at different levels and with different languages.

This paper is organized as follows; first we review the intended audience of the lab, then we discuss the overarching goals of the project, related research, metrics of learning and a critical comparison of similar efforts to support Chinese language learning with online resources.

II. INTENDED AUDIENCE

The Student to Student Chinese Language Lab is designed for and made available to all Internet-connected schools offering Mandarin Chinese Language classes. Extensive review of curriculum in k-12 US schools provided alignment between common content and materials available through the Lab. Some Lab sections may be used by teachers teaching about contemporary life in China. Colleges, universities, adult and community learning institutions, after-school programs and summer education programs teaching Beginner and Intermediate Mandarin Chinese or Chinese culture may also find the Lab useful. The Lab will also be available for teacher training, research purposes and as a resource for informal learning across many contexts. The project is managed by the Research Foundation of the State University of New York at Albany, and hosted by OneWorld Classrooms, a non-profit organization that promotes curriculum-based international exchanges.

III. GOAL OF THE PROJECT

The primary goal is to develop a total of 60 curriculum-based Lab modules, each centering on a cultural theme and grammatical element; containing a primary vocabulary list; audio and video featuring students from China speaking in Mandarin Chinese and sharing different aspects of their lives and cultures as well as video of students writing the Chinese characters on the vocabulary list.

Each module also includes vocabulary flashcards featuring student artwork. Some modules include a related PowerPoint featuring photos of students and video of students introducing themselves in Chinese and English. Another main objective is to develop an attractive, dynamic and intuitive Flash-based multimedia interface to present Lab modules to Mandarin Chinese students.

A corresponding goal of the project is to develop an electronic format through which all teachers who use the Lab may complete Lab evaluations, submit feedback, suggest future modules that match their curricula, and interact with other teachers.

IV. RELATED RESEARCH

The Student to Student Chinese Language Lab (Lab) model addresses needs highlighted in contemporary foreign language acquisition research in a number of ways. The Lab promotes cultural and linguistic competence, simulates socially mediated activity, utilizes multiple modalities, offers multiple ability tasks, and represents a platform for authentic language use. Each of these affordances is discussed in more detail below.

The Lab helps students to develop cultural and linguistic competence. Cultural competence, the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures [1], and linguistic competence, the ability to speak and understand

language in the context of its culture [2], are indisputably integral to foreign language learning. By presenting skits focusing on specific cultural themes, Chinese students introduce cultural knowledge into Lab modules. Students using this content in the US will discover cultural similarities and differences, which, in turn, will stimulate higher order thinking and positive attitudinal responses that benefit language acquisition.

The Lab also simulates socially mediated activity. According to sociocultural constructivism [3], learning is a socially mediated activity and peer interaction is central to knowledge construction. Through active interaction "language learning activity mirrors genuine human communication, the chief locus for understanding the world and self" [4].

In addition, the Lab lowers the learner's affective filter and utilizes multiple modalities. The Lab simulates a total immersion environment, introducing students in China who model natural conversation as "comprehensible input" [5]. The Lab's intrinsic interest, challenge and reward improve learners' motivational level and lower the anxiety of learning a foreign language, thus lowering students' "affective filter" [5]. The engagement of multiple modalities (image, audio, video, etc.) is also a highly positive contributing factor for the language learning process [6].

The Lab is also an example of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) that offers multiple ability tasks. [7], in addressing socio-collaborative language learning, terms "multiple ability tasks" as tasks that drive conceptual work and are intrinsically interesting and rewarding; allow different students to make different contributions; use multimedia; involve sight sound and touch; and are challenging.

Finally, the Lab is a platform for authentic language. Computer-mediated communication leads us to rethink the authentic, the authorial, and ultimately, the communicative itself [8]. "Proper" textbook language was artificially modeled to ensure "correct" if obviously staged input, with the result that language learning materials provided highly contrived pattern practice, yielding unnatural and boring dialogues [9]. The Lab features K-12 students in China speaking in naturalistic contexts, offering linguistic input that is up-to-date and true-to-life.

V. METRICS OF LEARNING

With regard to metrics of outcomes of learning, our plan is to continue to develop related assessment and skill testing tools, including: a game and quiz generator that incorporates module content, and an interactive Lab component through which students may record their own voices, save original audio files, and compare their spoken Mandarin with that of their native-speaking peers. Other objectives include a Lab search function that allows teachers and students to locate Lab content that matches their criteria by language proficiency level, cultural theme, grammatical element and vocabulary. We are also seeking to disseminate information about availability of the Lab broadly through various related newsletters, listservs, publications, associations, conferences

and networks, and, upon completion of the Lab in Year 3, marketing materials that will be mailed to schools. Finally we plan to assess the impact of the Lab on K-12 student learning of Chinese language and culture and to disseminate results of this initiative to the language teaching and learning community.

VI. CRITICAL COMPARISON

A table comparing well known existing resources, e.g. SCOLA, Multimedia Interactive Modules for Education and Assessment (MIMEA), University Online Multimedia Chinese Courses (UNIV), General Internet Chinese Resources (INT), common Web 2.0 resources (W2R) and the Lab (LAB) by the features is provided below. In the table, 1 indicates YES, ½ indicates IN SOME CASES and 0 indicates NO. As the table indicates, the Lab is the only resource that offers all 15 features; the next closest (UNIV) offers an aggregate of seven.

TABLE I. COMPARISON OF THE LANGUAGE LAB AND SIMILAR RESOURCES

Resource → / Features ↓	LAB	SCOLA	MIMEA	UNIV	INT	W2R
Audio	1	1	0	1	1	1
Video	1	1	1	1/2	1/2	1/2
Cultural PowerPoint (student-made)	1	0	0	0	0	0
Artwork Flashcards	1	0	0	0	0	0
Student to Student	1	0	0	0	0	0
Opportunity to Interact with Chinese Peers	1	0	0	0	0	1

A. Account of Related Materials

The following existing resources, offering hypermedia units for foreign language instruction and assessment, are in some ways similar to the Student to Student Chinese Language Lab.

SCOLA [10] receives and retransmits television programs from around the world in various languages and offers them to schools on a subscription basis. Its Insta-Lessons are hypermedia modules that include a video and an audio clip of a news broadcast segment. Students watch or listen to clips while viewing a transcript, translation, quiz or vocabulary window.

Multimedia Interactive Modules for Education and Assessment (MIMEA) [11] offers a series of language modules in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Russian, German and Vietnamese. The modules center on video clips that show native speakers and non-native speakers interacting in natural, unscripted situations. Each module also features cultural notes, a quiz and ideas for classroom activities.

University Online Multimedia Chinese Courses (UNIV), such as the California State University's Conversational Mandarin Chinese Online [12], Western Kentucky University's Audio Tutorials of Basic Chinese [13], the University of Oxford's Chinese Multimedia Course [14], Connecticut College's Chinese Video Exercises [15], the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Open Courseware Learning Chinese [16], and others like them, offer free online theme-based Beginner or Intermediate Level Chinese courses with series of audio and/or video clips and practice activities and grammar explanations.

General Internet Chinese Resources (INT), such as Zap Chinese [17] Language Guide BBC Real Chinese, and others like them, offer lessons in Chinese grammar, vocabulary and the writing system; units on Chinese characters with videos showing how the characters are written, grammar and vocabulary units organized by theme (Zap), audio clips and video (BBC only). 'Web 2.0' Resources (W2R), such as podcasts - like ChinesePod blogs and Popup Chinese, and social networking Websites – like Live Mocha, Mango Languages, and Ning, offer podcast audio and in some cases, opportunities to communicate and interact via the Internet with people who speak Chinese as a first language.

B. Critical Commentary

SCOLA's Insta-Lessons and MIMEA's interactive modules are similar to the Student to Student Chinese Language Lab in that they feature video and/or audio, transcripts and assessment. They differ in that they do not feature students who are native speakers or encourage peer-to-peer interaction and connection. SCOLA's videos feature professional newscasters and MIMEA's dialogues cater to college students and adults. Online University courses, while free of charge and very valuable for university Beginning and Intermediate Level Chinese students, are not designed for use in K-12 classrooms and do not feature K-12 students from China in the audio and video sections. The other Internet resources are typically word and sentence-based 'audio-lingual' foreign language teaching resources. With the exception of BBC Real Chinese (which only offers only ten short units), the units do not have dialogues; instead, theme-based sentences are written in Chinese characters and/or pinyin and translated into English. Audio is typically the only interactive feature. Some of these also have outside advertising or require payment for advanced lessons. While podcasts, blogs and social networking Web sites offer independent learning opportunities, a high level of student input and opportunities to communicate via the Internet with people who speak Chinese as a first language, they are typically not designed for K-12 classroom use and therefore do not follow national standards or K-12 Chinese curricula. Likewise, they do not encourage focused and structured learning and do not permit teachers to monitor student communication for appropriateness. While they are a valuable resource for language classes, the do not typically follow scaffolded activities and sequential learning patterns.

In some cases, advanced or complete resources are only available for a fee.

The Language Lab can be accessed (for free!) at [19] and [20].

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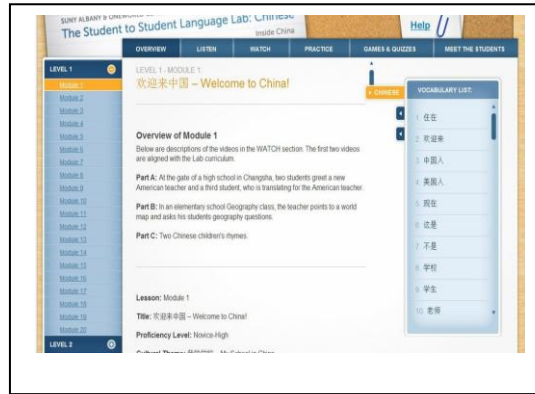[19] http://bit.ly/x0JY9q [retrieved: April, 2012]

Figure 1.   Language Lab Interface

Figure 2. Module View of the Lab