New Tools of the Trade

Technology & Language Learning

ART BY CHERYL DENISE COLLINS/SHUTTERSTOCK, WALEED BINSELIM, AND GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Technology revolutionizes the ways instructors teach foreign languages and the way students learn.

BY KIM FERNANDEZ

REMEMBER TRADING HANDWRITTEN LETTERS AND CAREFULLY TIMED, LONG DISTANCE PHONE CALLS with your college roommate? Not so long ago, parents sent their children off to school with a pocket full of quarters for the payphone in the hall, and a box of writing paper, envelopes, and stamps to stay in touch with friends and family back at home (not to mention a paper address book to keep track of all those addresses and phone numbers, and a lovely pen that may have been a high school graduation gift).

Mention that to a college student today and you can expect to get a blank stare in return. Letters? Stamps? To a student in 2013, those sound very labor intensive and awfully slow—not an effective way to communicate at all.

Language studies are no different. The thought of learning a language using a hard-bound textbook and perhaps a few cassette tapes in a lab is long gone for the most part. While it may have worked for generations of students, today's find that boring and slow to be attractive.

It makes sense—today's students are also entering a world that's shrinking rapidly. Skype, Facetime, e-mail, and the demise of pay-by-minute long distance have accelerated global communications and the business world to the point that knowing another language is a tremendous step up for professionals in almost every industry. And those professionals want to learn those languages the same way they do everything else: at twice the speed of light.

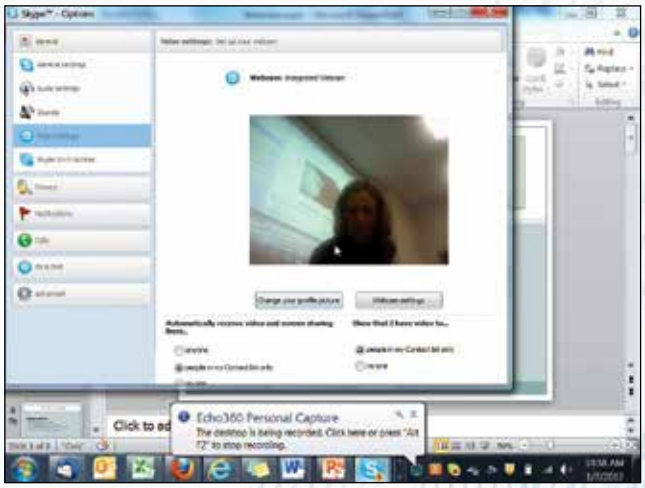

PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Multiple layers of technology are at work in an online classroom: a lecture capture program is open and recording the session (Echo 360); Skype is occurring with at least one distance participant; and a PowerPoint projection is set up for both in-person participants and those participating via the lecture capture module.

Language education, then, has followed suit, offering up more classes and learning tools based in technology than ever before. Students may still have printed textbooks in some language classes, but they also learn with their smartphones, digital video recorders, blogs, and online conference rooms where they see and converse with their peers from down the hall and across the world.

PHOTO CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

This, educators say, makes language both more relevant to students and more accessible. It's easier for students to learn a language when they speak it regularly than when they just read vocabulary lists and takes tests. Not that those things don't have value—they certainly do—but hooking students into the technology they've embraced in the rest of their lives in the classroom brings the study alive, makes it relevant, and in some cases, offers much better results than traditional classroom techniques.

Introducing High-Tech

One of the leaders in high-tech language education is the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES), whose state-of-the-art classroom is equipped with software and hardware that's designed to get students not only listening, but speaking more.

"The most valuable thing about this classroom is its ability to get students to talk more," says Tammy Gharbi, acting coordinator of the university's Foreign Language Instructional Center. "We know that in the average classroom, the most challenging thing is getting students to talk. They listen, they read the textbook, and they fill out worksheets, but some studies have shown that in a typical week, a

foreign language student may only talk for seven minutes a week. If you have 20 students and you're meeting twice a week, how many minutes of utterance are you going to get?"

The Foreign Language Instructional Center is a Title III program to expand the number of U.S. students who speak a critical language, especially those in need. It has a three-pronged mission: to work on campus to grow language-learning opportunities for students and faculty, to work in the surrounding community, and to work in K–12 schools nearby that offer little to no language education.

"The first thing Title III did was establish our state-of-the-art classroom," says Gharbi. It's based on Sony Virtuoso Major instructional software, which links with Rosetta Stone and other high-tech learning tools to get students both listening and speaking more.

"We can have 20 students talking at once," says Gharbi. "They're all talking into headsets and they can be saying anything—working with Rosetta Stone, using prompts from a lesson you've given them, reacting to a newspaper you've pulled up from Saudi Arabia, talking about poetry, or working in dialogue groups. While they're talking, the instructor can listen to them one by one and give instant feedback. The instructor can correct pronunciation, give positive feedback, or make assessments for a formal oral quiz."

She says the system has been useful in gauging where students are in their learning process and judging whether the pace of a class is working for that individual group.

"You find out that even though you might have some native speakers in the class, they don't seem to be ready for their midterm and it's time to go back and review," she says. "There are so many possibilities, but at the end of the day, you get to have students talking much more than they would with just a live instructor in the room."

UMES's classroom seats 20 students and isn't used for all language classes. "We're juggling the number of hours in a week," says Gharbi. "We give priority to critical-need classes." It's been used for everything from Chinese to Russian to Haitian Creole.

Talking also takes center stage at classes at State University of New York at New Paltz, where instructor Sarah Elia says technology plays a key role.

"We use cell phones a lot," she says. "Most students have their smartphones in the classroom, and our students tend to be older and more mature. We can trust that they're on task with what they're

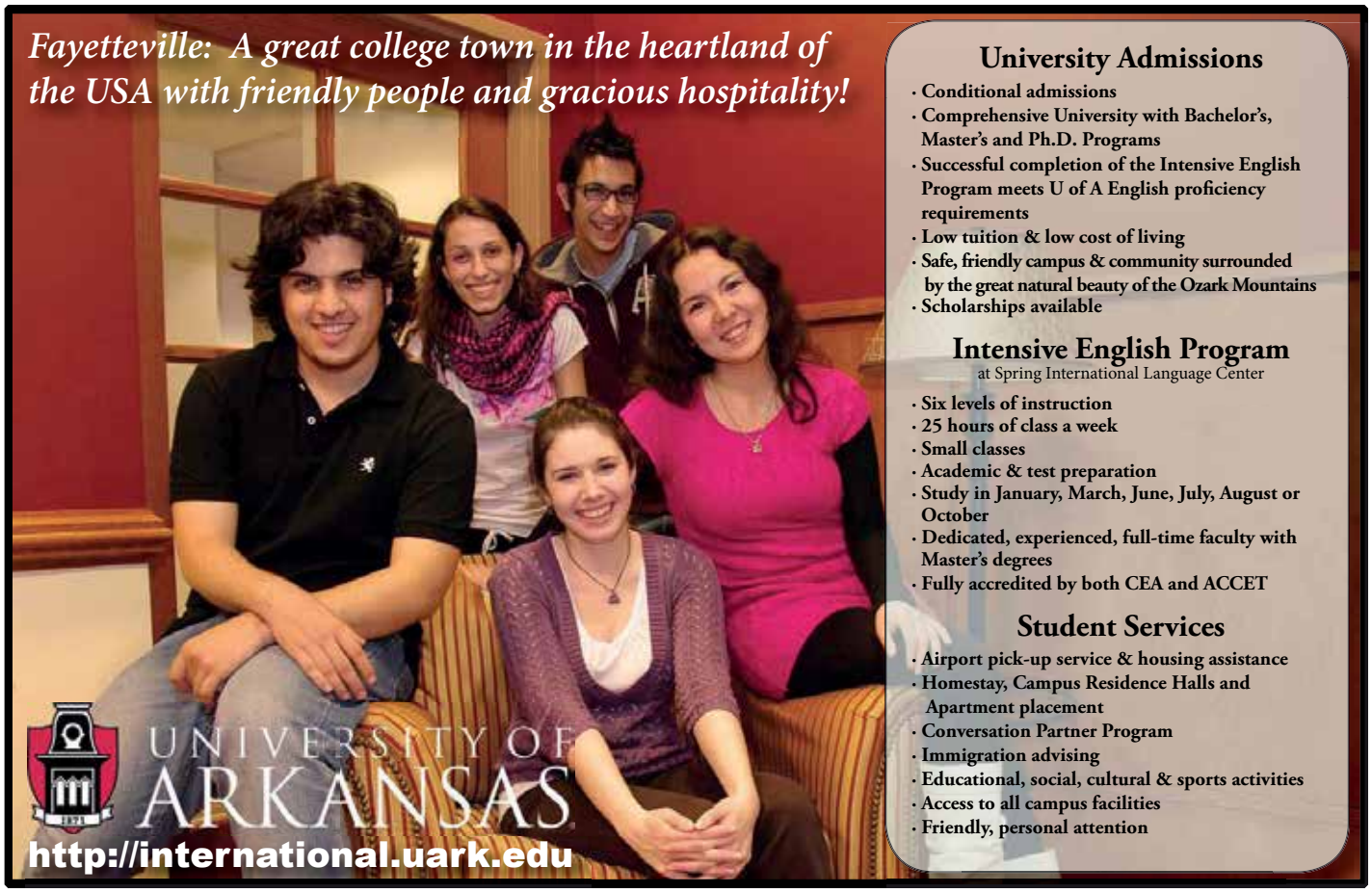

PHOTO COURTESY OF WALEED BINSELIM

International student Waleed Binselim from Saudi Arabia, on the left, gets language learning tips from Sarah Elia, lecturer and event coordinator of the Haggerty English Language Program at SUNY New Paltz.

supposed to be doing." She makes the most of the phone's stopwatch and camera to teach languages quickly.

"In our listening and speaking classes, we use the timer or stopwatch on the phone to monitor the time and keep debates going," she says. "And we use the cameras for lots of different activities. If I'm teaching a lower group, I'll introduce 15 new words to the class and then give them 15 minutes to go outside the classroom and take pictures of those vocabulary words."

She says it actually works best for more abstract words, such as "enthusiastic," where students have to think about expressing the word and not just finding an object. "They collect the pictures, bring them back to class, upload them to a computer, and write sentences about their images."

They also use the video recording functions of their phones. "We use their video cameras to record speeches," Elia says. "The students have to evaluate themselves from the recordings. They used to use video cameras, upload the recordings to a computer, and burn them to CDs, which was a lot of work. Now, they just use their cell phones to video their speeches and debates."

Elia also uses other tech tools to teach. One of her favorites is the online video.

"TED talks are popular," she says. "They offer listening and speaking at a higher level. We also access samples of academic speeches, which offer really good content about American culture and thinking."

And then there are websites. Elia is a fan of the online Kahn Academy, where students can access online lessons and lectures on their own time. "It's like having a private tutor," she says. "You can go to

Learning With Dropbox, Google Docs, Quizlet, and More

Nat Namdokmai teaches English and makes movies at home in Thailand, and moved to the United States to study four years ago. He's enrolled in Japanese courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and says technology has played a big part in his study of the language.

"They use technology to teach us to speak and write in Japanese," he says. "We used PowerPoint and videos on YouTube in some classes. When I got to the upper-level classes and started learning business Japanese, we started using it more to communicate."

Content, he says, is taught online in some of his classes. "We have to check the website and use it to do our homework," he says. "We use Quizlet online a lot too. Once a week, we use Google Docs."

That, he says, changed the way he thought about online learning. "The first time I used Google Docs, I did it with a bunch of people together," he said. "There's a lot you can see—you can share your screen or show videos and talk about them at the same time they're playing. If you have a paper, you can share it with the whole class at the same time. It's really easy."

His translation class made a lot of use of Facebook to post information on assignments and activities, and the class turned in assignments and collaborated on things via Dropbox.

"You have a folder and you can share with just one person or with the class," he explains. "You drop your Japanese work in that folder and people can see it right away. They translate it and put it back in that folder and we can communicate about it right away. You correct your work and put it back in the folder, and it notifies you when there's a new folder or new information for class in there." That, he says, has made his learning faster than it's been in traditional paper-based courses.

His teachers also use video, recording narrative and questions and having students record their answers in the same way. "If we have an assignment or a reading test, we record it and send it to our professor," he says. "We also use audio recordings in the same way. It's very helpful. It helps us learn faster," he says. "In the old days, you had to look at tests on paper and you didn't know how to pronounce all those words. You didn't get to practice those things like we do. It was like talking into an empty room. Now, it's having a conversation."

"The main benefit is being able to check our work right online," he says. "Taking a language class online can be hard if you don't meet a real person. You can't learn the language, I don't think. But we meet online and share information and share things for our class. Assignments are easier and faster—I drop it in my folder and know it's there on Dropbox. It's corrected and returned right away. The communication is faster and we're learning faster."

PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY OF NAT NAMDOKMAI

Nat Namdokmai teaches English in Thailand. He is currently a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has learned English with various forms of technology.

the website and it's likely you'll find something your teacher is doing in class. It's a great way to watch a lesson broken down, or watch it again and again. If you know you're having a lesson on something tomorrow, you can go to the site, watch a video, and get an introduction. Students love it."

Online Learning

Language classes have also embraced courses taught entirely online, finding that they bring together students from all over the world to learn together. Sherry Steeley, TEFL instructor at Georgetown University's Center for Language Education and Development, says the 19-week online classes she teaches are very popular, drawing a mix of students from the immediate Washington, D.C. area and in other countries.

"The students are very active," she says. "It's not a self-paced course in any way. We have webinars and classroom assignments that are looking at translating theory to practice within students' own context."

Students use journal writing and blog posting to practice their language skills, interacting with each other over the internet in whatever language they're learning.

"The blog is fairly significant," she says. "It's a place for students to synthesize learning, theory, and practice." The blog is student led, and offers complementary practice to the formal lessons and assignments completed during the course curriculum.

Christa Hansen, director, special programs and program development at Georgetown, says online offerings all come together through Blackboard, which serves as a sort of hub for everything students do. "It's pretty straightforward," Hansen says. "Students get their assignments through Blackboard and have a certain timeframe to respond and give their information, and then they get feedback. We also use the blog to allow students to continue discussing things with colleagues, and that runs through Blackboard as well."

That means less for students to learn on the tech side, making the courses easier overall.

"This year we're incorporating speaking components where students are responding to things and recording their responses," she says. "They upload their recordings to Blackboard, and we can give feedback on those responses with a discreet focus on accuracy, fluency, and responding to the content demonstration of understanding what the questions are asking."

Georgetown, she says, has found that online learning is a great way to prepare students for in-classroom instruction as well. "We have students who come here for a four-month program," she says. "Before they come here, they do eight weeks of asynchronous online

Learning English in High-Tech

Chinese kindergarten teacher Pei Ge enrolled in Georgetown University's EFL language program last fall to start mastering her English skills. She didn't expect to learn using the electronic devices in her pocket and backpack when she flew to Washington, D.C. from her native Shanghai, but says they ended up making a huge difference over the semester.

"I used my laptop, iPad Mini, cell phone, Facebook, and Skype," she says of the classes taught by Andrew Screen, who embraced high-tech teaching methods a few years ago. "I really liked them. I also Google-chatted with the instructor when I needed to clarify questions about assignments."

The technological tools, she says, made the class easier for her. "I used my iPad Mini to take notes in class. When I needed help for English grammar on essays or presentations, I could talk about that with my friends via Skype or Facetime. And the EFL program uses Facebook to post extracurricular events that all students are invited to participate in. I really enjoyed using all of these tools."

The devices and sites also came into play during class, she says, and having an instructor who knew how and when to use them helped her learn the language.

"Professor Screen used unique teaching skills that surprised me a lot," she says. "For example, he is like a magician during the one-hour class, using a variety of pictures on PowerPoint slides to help students practice different kinds of verb tenses. He played short videos that related to our grammar, and helped students understand clearly how to use the grammar appropriately."

Combining the tools with body language and role-playing, she says, helped make the idiosyncrasies of English much easier to understand than a more traditional class would have.

"I had a lot of fun in the class," she says.

Screen uses other tools, including digital recordings in a campus lab and clickers that let students respond to classroom polls and questions, in his English classes. He says those are powerful tools that bring out even shy students to participate and allow him to gauge what they're learning and where they might need reinforcement. For her per, We says those kinds of tools helped immensely and sped up her studies.

"Using the online grammar lab and clickers in class meant I learned English faster than I learned with traditional textbooks and classroom learning in my country," she says.

Currently a full-time student at Towson University, We hopes to master English well enough to start teaching English-speaking children her native Chinese tongue.

work. So when they arrive, they find themselves in situations that use a lot of what they've already practiced."

That, she says, is a tremendous benefit. "This is not just a language classroom," she says. "You want their ears to be attuned to hearing rapid, informal American speech and for them to be able to begin talking about things. While they're working on problem-solving and reading materials online, they're thinking about the processes that are used in those kinds of settings. They're interacting with faculty online, and they're doing site visits right away when they get here. All of that predeparture online work is foundational for getting them to think about those kinds of things and starting to become comfortable with it. They're getting used to the language and they're developing confidence."

Georgetown has used online learning for about 10 years, she says, and has found that while it offers great benefits, it's likely not for everyone.

"The work is not done at a set time," she says of her program. "What that can mean is that if a student is not particularly self-disciplined, they may not be as timely as they need to be to keep up. That part can be a challenge for students, especially those who want to do other things besides being full-time in language instruction."

That said, they have found a way to make it more engaging and give those students a bit of added motivation.

"We've found that one thing that helps make this successful is to find some way to build a community and make some connection between the students, and between students and instructor," she says. "We do that through discussion groups and blogs. Most of the language training we do by distance methods is part of blended delivery that helps build the community, keep students motivated, and keeps them responding and following through on things."

Pei Ge, a Chinese kindergarten teacher, studied English at Georgetown University last fall.

PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY OF PEI GE

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Professor Employs Technology to Teach Japanese

Jason Jones, assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, teaches a variety of Japanese classes to English-speaking students and says technology has made a big difference in the way students learn what can be a complex language.

"The graduate program I teach is completely online," he says. While that's totally technology-based, it also means finding creative ways to make the material relevant and capture the attention of students he may never meet.

"You really find yourself leveraging whatever technology you can leverage," he says. That includes an app that lets him test students on-screen and others that let students in different countries interact in Japanese.

"I got here in 2010 and soon after, put together a fellowship application through the State University of New York's COIL Center," he says. COIL is the Center for Collaborative Online International Learning, and it works to expand language learning into cross-cultural learning that sensitizes students to the traditions and perceptions of people in other countries.

Jones says his grant helped him put together a course that was taught with students from his class and students from Japan.

"I went to grad school in Japan," he explains. "I spoke with someone I knew there and we decided to have an international course with students here and students there." It wasn't as much a language class as a culture class designed to expose students in both countries to the thoughts and perceptions of the other.

That course used social networks, including Facebook and Twitter, to get students talking and interacting, along with an online portfolio students used to create, post, and collaborate on work.

"Students on the Japanese side posted recipes that they taught my students here," he says. "We went and bought the recipes, and the students had to make the food and provide a report on it. It was exhausting, but it was a great experience."

"Everything took place in a dorm," he says of that class. "It's a living learning program where students with similar interests live together and take the class as a community. It lent some interesting aspects to the project," and brought the lessons into day-to-day living.

Other courses have also embraced technology to teach. "A colleague has put together a business Japanese course," he says. "She's added a face-to-face component where students visit a Japanese company and have the opportunity to test the things they've learned. But she's using Google Hangouts, videos, and online short stories as well."

Jones teaches a course on translating Japanese media that has students using editing software to subtitle shows and media, and lets them participate in fan sites for popular books or films. "That's pretty popular," he says. His classes routinely make use of Dropbox, Facebook, Twitter, and Desire to Learn as well.

"Having a translation course online is a great benefit," he says. "It mimics the nature of a lot of [paid] freelance translation. The students will get a lot of assignments online. They're going to be communicating online, so they have to do it well. They have to research things online. A lot of students arrive here not yet knowing how to do those things.

Despite using a lot of high-tech teaching tools, Jones admits it all has its limits and that straight online language learning isn't a great match for all students.

"People have embraced technology in the classroom where they can," he says. "It's a good idea to have it all. But could you only offer Japanese courses online? I'm not sure people would agree with that. People are more comfortable, I think, with traditional face-to-face courses. As a supplement, though, I think people are interested."

> "Having a translation course online is a great benefit."

He says the tables were turned last year when he took an online course on making the most of Google and traded in his teacher's desk for a student's.

"It was a great course," he says. "It came with quizzes and lots of videos and things. But I quickly realized that I wanted to be on the other end of things! Taking a class like that is a quick way to realize how strict you have to be with yourself in online learning and how disciplined you have to be to make things work. It's not as clearly defined as classroom learning."

That said, he says his online classes also have tremendous benefits.

"I can see if my students are working efficiently," he says. "I can see how they work. I can tell them that if they try something this other way, they'll get better results or it'll be faster. And sometimes it's surprising to see how efficiently they can do things."

That's also true for his in-person classes.

"I can go around the classroom and check what they're doing on my iPad or iPhone," he says. "There's actually something magical in being able to do that. I can see what everyone is doing without physically looking over their shoulder."

In the Classroom

Andrew Screen teaches at Georgetown's Center for Language Education and Development, but mainly in a classroom as opposed to online. He says he didn't exactly embrace technology when he was first asked about using it, but has, over the last two or three years, come to appreciate what it can do in a language classroom.

He's a big fan of clickers, which are handheld devices students can use to respond to questions instead of raising their hands. Students use the clickers to answer questions, and the instructor monitors answers on a screen at his or her desk.

"They're very engaging," he says. "I can pose a question or have Powerpoint slides set up and ask things, and I can see who's responding. I can see the results of how they're responding too. A lot of research shows that students have an attention span of 14 to 18 minutes. That's not a very long period of time, and then they lose attention. We're trying to keep them constantly engaged in what we're doing."

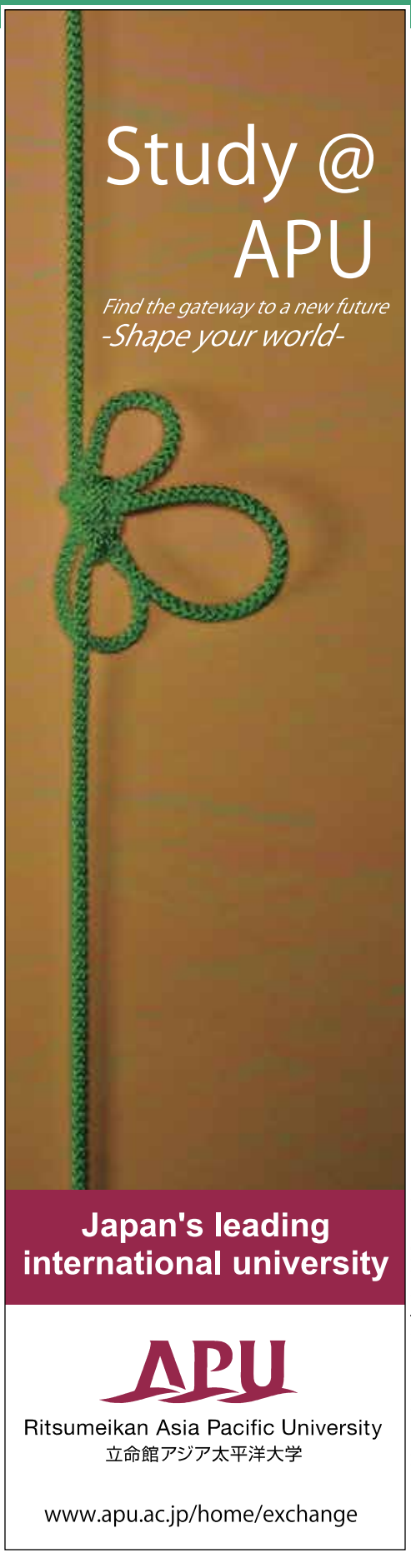
"They're very good for needs-based assessments," he continues. "If I want to go over present perfect tense, for example, they may say they already know it. I can see what they really know by creating a multiple-choice quiz on Powerpoint and have students answer with the clickers. We can do 10 questions in 10 minutes and I can see that problems two and eight were challenging, and then we can go back right then and address those areas."

For their part, students love the devices. "You can see them light up as soon as I bring the clickers out," Screen says. "It's beyond clicking a button. They're willing to step outside the box when they're using these." And it's better for him, too. "We can spend more time working on problematic issues rather than all of the things we've done," he says. "I want every minute of class to be an effective and efficient use of time. This really streamlines the material so I can do that."

PHOTO CREDIT: GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Andrew Screen teaches an advanced communication Skills class teaching English to international students at Georgetown University. The students are using iClickers in the class. Screen uses them as a polling device in class so that all students can participate (interactively). After he poses a question through PowerPoint, students respond by clicking A-E on their clickers and the responses appear in a polling format (bar chart, which Screen says "is a good jumping off point for discussion."

Gharbi says devices like clickers and headsets have a very definite advantage over traditional raise-your-hand classes: they bring out shy learners. "How you speak is very closely identified with your identity," she says. "To say something with a bad accent or struggle to be understood is a very real fear. This takes away that talking in front of a classroom. You're just talking into a computer. It may seem less personal, but your instructor hears you and you are practicing that



Free Website Connects Language Learners Worldwide In Classrooms and Beyond

In 2005 a Japanese instructor approached Todd Bryant, language program administrator at Dickinson College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to help her improve her use of technology in her classroom.

Bryant ended up creating a technology program called MIXXER that connects language learners in different countries using Skype's videoconferencing platform. It is a free educational site for language learners designed to connect language learners around the world so that everyone is both student and teacher. To date, there are approximately 100,000 users around the world.

> "It gets students to have a conversation with a native speaker that is personalized."

At Dickinson, 13 foreign language faculty use the MIXXER as part of teaching their courses. There is also a blog component where students can blog in a foreign language and receive feedback from a native speaker of that language.

"It gets students to have a conversation with a native speaker that is personalized," says Brian Brubaker "In this digital age, today's students are used to a lot of customization, and this is a way to learn in a customized manner. It works for them pedagogically and it can be more relevant because it is a conversation that is personal to them."

Using this platform can help students speak to native speakers before going abroad. "It allowed me to speak to Japanese people without being in Japan," says Sondey Olaseun, a junior at Dickinson who is currently studying abroad in Japan. "The MIXXER made the learning process much more exciting; I think that it is best used for speaking practice."

Any person or institution can use the MIXXER to learn a language or enhance language learning. To learn more and participate in the MIXXER, visit http://www.language-exchanges.org.

–Elaina Loveland

PHOTO CREDIT: CARL SANDER SOCOLOW/DICKINSON COLLEGE

Sondey Olaseun, a student at Dickinson College studying Japanese, with MIXXER creator Todd Bryant; Akiko Meguro, senior lecturer of Japanese; and Alex Bates, assistant professor of Japanese.

language—you're responding to a prompt or you're reading today's newspaper. You don't have that student who's embarrassed in front of the classroom."

There are other benefits, too, she says. Whether because they're more engaged, speaking more regularly, or generally having more fun, more students are sticking with language instruction for longer periods of time, and they're learning more in that time than they used to.

"They're learning faster," she says. "Grades are higher. And our instructors think it's helping with true proficiency."

KIM FERNANDEZ is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "Designing Destiny," in the July/August 2012 issue.

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