Increasing Assessment Literacy Among LCTL Instructors Through Blended Learning

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Abstract

This article describes the need for assessment literacy among less commonly taught language (LCTL) educators as well as one approach toward providing professional development to such educators. This article first provides background on assessment literacy and, specifically, language assessment literacy. It documents the critical role assessment plays in language programs to ensure that student learning outcomes can be documented. Next, it examines the specific challenges of assessment for LCTL instructors, both because of the dearth of assessments in these languages and as the assessment background of LCTL instructors, which, like that of many foreign language educators, may be limited. To illustrate one approach to improving assessment literacy in LCTL instructors, this article describes a case study that suggests that blended learning may be a successful professional development method for LCTL instructors. Finally, the article explores the challenges and opportunities inherent to such an approach, while also recognizing the limitations.

Introduction
Increasing Assessment Literacy

Language assessment literacy, or what language educators need to know about assessment, is fundamental knowledge for language instructors and administrators working with students in the United States (Stiggins, 2001; Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Taylor, 2009).

Without a firm grasp of assessment basics, language educators cannot effectively and properly use the assessment tools at their disposal, nor can they develop appropriate assessments for their students. Without appropriate assessment, it is impossible to accurately gauge student language learning outcomes, a task that is crucial in present times, especially for less commonly taught languages (LCTLs).

It is critically important for the United States to develop and nurture a cohort of fluent speakers of LCTLs for reasons of national security as well as to preserve the world’s cultural and linguistic diversity (Birkbichler, 2007; Brecht, 2007; Ruther, 2003; United States Department of Education, n.d.). Despite growing efforts to teach LCTLs to heritage and non-heritage speakers, however, assessment tools and techniques to measure student learning in these languages are in short supply (Jackson & Malone, 2009). Therefore, assessing and accurately reporting student learning and making confident assertions about student language proficiency becomes difficult.

Given this relative lack of assessment resources, it is perhaps unsurprising that there also exists a dearth of resources to educate LCTL instructors and program administrators in how to develop or select appropriate assessments, administer them properly, interpret the results in a useful and reliable way, and apply the results to make informed, assessment-related decisions. The professional development needed to make these decisions is truly pressing for LCTL instructors, many of whom are native speakers of the target language but lack certification or teacher training (National Foreign Language Center, 2009b). LCTL instructors need efficient and effective ways of gaining professional development in selecting, developing and conducting assessments.

In this paper, we examine one attempt to improve knowledge of assessment fundamentals for LCTL instructors (N=40) in 2008 via a blended learning approach, and the impact of this course on the subsequent program developed for 2009. A blended learning approach, which includes distance learning online and face-to-face instruction, can combine the best of both modes. Though this article will focus on
the blended learning format overall, the term “distance learning” will be used when referring specifically to the online component of the blended learning course. In this case, the blended learning approach has proven a successful method for providing professional development in assessment, though accompanied by attendant challenges.

This article begins with a review of the concept of assessment literacy and its importance in the education field. The assessment challenges facing LCTLs will be addressed, emphasizing why assessment literacy is especially important for these languages. A professional development approach employing blended learning is suggested for fostering assessment literacy in educators to mitigate the effects of geographic isolation and limited teacher training for LCTL educators. To explore this system of professional development, a case study of an assessment literacy program for LCTL educators is examined, with emphasis on opportunities, challenges, and lessons that informed the subsequent year’s course. Finally, limitations and conclusions are discussed, with an eye to further addressing the assessment needs of LCTLs.

**Assessment Literacy**

Assessment literacy usually refers to a person’s understanding of how to assess student outcomes; language assessment literacy extends this definition to the specific issues faced in language classrooms (Boyles, 2005; Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Stiggins, 2001; Taylor, 2009). However, though it is generally agreed that classroom teachers need to assess students’ progress (Schafer, 1993; Stoynoff & Chapelle, 2005; NEA, 1983), the fact remains that many teachers have a limited understanding of assessment fundamentals (Popham, 2009).

Strong, properly-implemented assessment can give teachers, students, and all stakeholders’ important information about student performance (Carroll, 1967). In the case of LCTLs, it can provide an accurate and much-needed portrait of student proficiency in critical or endangered languages. Assessment can and should align with teaching, forming a relationship in which assessment informs and improves teaching, and vice versa (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005). However, this relationship cannot take place, and none of the benefits can be reaped, if language teachers do not have any background or training in assessment and lack basic assessment literacy.
A recent survey of assessment uses and needs, (Malone, et al., 2009), found that in addition to further tools for assessment, teachers wanted more information on how to select and develop tests, how to interpret test scores, and how to report them. Further, results showed that standardized language tests that had been developed for a certain context and purpose were being used out of context, for different purposes. Glisan and Foltz (1998) found that teachers tend to base proficiency ratings on classroom achievement and completion of textbook chapters rather than on test results consistent with widespread assessment scales and classroom frameworks like the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines - Speaking – (Revised, 1999), the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners, and the National Standards in Foreign Language Education. This is even more likely to occur in the case of LCTLs, where assessment tools are in short supply and therefore more likely to be used for purposes for which they were not intended. The need for assessment literacy in LCTL educators is clear.

When instructors understand assessment, or have assessment literacy, they can participate in and create a learning culture in their classrooms (Shepard, 2000). Assessment, when used appropriately, can have great positive washback to the classroom. Positive washback, the intended, desired effects of testing on teaching, can take many forms (Hughes, 2003). Positive washback from testing can improve teaching, motivate learners, and increase the overall quality of a language learning experience for all involved. With new technological resources at their disposal, it has never been easier for LCTL educators to take steps to gain important training and knowledge in assessment literacy at a pace that suits their work and lifestyles (Malone, 2008).

1.1 Assessment literacy and LCTLs

LCTLs have traditionally had insufficient resources for assessment and instruction (Johnson et al., 1976). Even though LCTL programs are becoming more common in the elementary and secondary school environments (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999), in addition to the post-secondary realm, corresponding resources do not necessarily multiply at the same rate. In 1997, Chinese instruction was offered in .3% of elementary schools, a figure which jumped to a full 3% by 2008 (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009). However, according to the Foreign Language Assessment Directory (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2009), there are only five tests available for elementary
school students in Chinese. This number is particularly striking when compared with Spanish, for which the same database identifies 17 tests for the K-5 level. From 1998 to 2002, enrollments in Arabic language programs in U.S. institutions of higher education increased by 92.3%, and from 2002 to 2006, Arabic language enrollments increased by 126.5% (Furman et al, 2007; Welles, 2004). However, the Foreign Language Assessment Directory shows only 13 tests of Arabic at the university level, compared to 19 Spanish tests. With limited assessment resources for LCTLs, instructors are faced with the options of developing their own assessments, translating existing assessments, or selecting assessments that may not be appropriate to their students. For example, languages such as Swahili or Turkish may only have tests available that are designed for specific proficiency or age levels, or tests that come with a price tag beyond the reach of most programs, which leaves educators in the bind described above (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2009).

Using a test for a purpose other than that for which it was originally intended results in a lack of validity of the test and its results (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Davidson & Lynch, 2002; Brown, 2003; Brown, 2005). Similarly, translating an existing assessment could mean the loss of cultural authenticity in the resulting assessment. Such cultural inauthenticity could occur if the original test included items that were not culturally appropriate in the target language. Further, translating a test from one language to another without developing an assessment framework document could result in a failure to assess specific features of the target language. Without proper assessment training, LCTL educators face all of these challenges and more if they decide to develop their own assessment program.

It would be easy to look at these challenges to LCTL assessment and decide to forego an assessment plan and focus on instruction, but this would be short-sighted at best, and detrimental at worst. To ensure the success of LCTL programs, it is imperative that instructors and administrators be able to implement sound plans for assessment to inform instruction, evaluate the program, and determine and measure language proficiency outcomes for students. The benefits of assessment and evaluation plans for LCTL programs are myriad and complex. The information gathered from language assessments can be used to inform program evaluations, and when used effectively, such evaluations can inform instruction by showing instructors which practices are working and in which areas students need more help
Increasing Assessment Literacy (Norris, 2009). On a broader scale, evaluation and assessment are necessary to ensure the continuation of language programs by providing documented proof of language learning.

The sudden growth in LCTL programs in the United States indicates that many LCTL programs are recently established, and many operate outside the bounds of traditional language instructional time periods. For example, the STARTALK summer language initiative, supported by the National Security Language Initiative, included 77 student language programs that were administered during the summer of 2009 (National Foreign Language Center, 2009a). Each of these programs offered students language instruction in Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Persian, Swahili, Turkish, or Urdu, all programs began no earlier than the summer of 2007, and most ran for the summer only.

Many programs in elementary schools and universities also face tenuous financial support despite passionate support from the educators and students involved. Given this situation, the necessity of advocating for the continuation of these programs is obvious. Assessment can be used for advocacy purposes, but only if it has been conducted and the results interpreted by educators who understand assessment. Results from program evaluations that were conducted using reliable and valid assessments can prove to funders, the community, and school administrations that students are making real gains in these languages. Tangible program results are a powerful tool in the fight to keep LCTL programs alive and to justify establishing new ones. For these reasons, it is imperative that LCTL instructors and program administrators have a firm background in assessment literacy.

2.2 Blended learning for professional development

LCTL educators often hold many different positions. Given the precarious situation of funding for LCTL programs and the short-term or part-time periods during which many programs run, many LCTL instructors and administrators are seldom able to support themselves through LCTL education alone. Many work in the language education community in other roles, and still others work outside of the education community entirely. Indeed, a number of LCTL
instructors are not certified teachers and have little formal training in instruction, much less in assessment (National Foreign Language Center, 2009b). The conflicting responsibilities of many of these instructors necessitate that professional development programs meet their schedules. The use of technology-delivered professional development helps to meet this challenge, and also addresses the need for educators to receive current, innovative training in a self-access format.

Blended learning, or hybrid instruction, as it is sometimes called, refers to instructional courses that combine traditional, face-to-face methods of instruction with learning that takes place online. This blend of different media for information transfer can overcome geographical barriers that might otherwise stand in the way of professional development, and interactive features of internet technology help to create a community despite the geographic distance. There are considerable opportunities for increased and enhanced learning in this format, but challenges exist as well. To illustrate these issues, a STARTALK teacher-training program in assessment is described.

Case Study: Professional Development in Assessment through Blended Learning

3.1 Rationale

As previously discussed, there is a need for assessment literacy in LCTL educators. With increased knowledge of assessment, LCTL instructors and administrators are able to appropriately apply foundational principles when selecting or developing assessment instruments or systems. To this end, a blended learning, professional development program in assessment was created for LCTL educators in the summer of 2008, and reiterated and improved in summer 2009, with funding from the STARTALK language program. The program had the following goals:

1. To give participants a background in the basics concepts of assessment;
2. To identify the specific assessment needs of each participant;
3. To develop assessment tasks and rubrics that could be used by the participants in their STARTALK programs; and
4. To plan for and sequence assessment in their programs.
The following sections examine the program in detail.

3.2 STARTALK

STARTALK is a presidential language initiative to teach languages deemed critical to U.S. national security interests to youth and to simultaneously develop a corps of trained, native-speaker instructors in these languages (National Foreign Language Center, 2010). STARTALK language programs have taken place in the summers of 2007, 2008, and 2009, with new languages and student age levels added each year. In summer 2007, the programs concentrated on language courses in Arabic and Chinese for high school students. 2008 saw the introduction of Hindi, Persian, and Urdu and the expansion of student programming into the middle school level. In the summer of 2009, the program expanded to include Swahili and Turkish, and encompass student programs in elementary through university levels.

Each summer, teacher training programs took place as well.

3.3 Participants

In the summer of 2008, a STARTALK grant was awarded to create a professional development program to promote assessment literacy for instructors and educators in other STARTALK programs. This assessment literacy course made use of the blended learning model and was offered to teachers of all STARTALK languages in all STARTALK states. The program drew instructors and administrators of Arabic, Chinese, Hindi/Urdu and Persian programs of all age levels from 14 states (in 2008, STARTALK programs existed in only 31 states). Table 1 shows a distribution of the participants by language in summer 2008.

Table 1. Participants in summer 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number of Participants (N=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi/Urdu</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Table 1 shows, a majority of participants in the summer 2008 program were focused on Chinese language teaching. This presented a challenge to planning and including appropriate content for all languages, but it is also perhaps not surprising, given the distribution of all summer 2008 STARTALK programs. In 2008, STARTALK funded a total of 35 Arabic language programs, and 64 Chinese language programs, which suggests a strong presence of Chinese language instructors in the field that summer.

To register for the blended learning course in assessment, educators were required to complete an application form about their background in instruction and assessment. Most instructors reported little to no formal training in assessment, which speaks to the need for training in this topic in the LCTL field.

3.4 Course content

The blended model of professional development combines distance learning with face-to-face instruction, and this particular program focused on a three-day, face-to-face workshop with online instruction leading up to and following it. Research on distance learning courses highlights the importance of carefully developed materials that maximize the benefits of the online medium while not overloading the participants (Goertler & Winke, 2008; Clark & Mayer, 2008). With this in mind, content developed for the online portion of the course attempted to communicate the most important concepts in a clear fashion, with helpful graphic content, and in smaller chunks to allow participant to take in the content. The content covered included basic assessment literacy concepts, tools to develop assessment tasks and rubrics, and resources and further instruction related to assessment. Table 2 outlines the basic content of the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Module 1</td>
<td>Introduction to technology</td>
<td>How to use course technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 2</td>
<td>Key concepts</td>
<td>Validity, reliability, practicality, and impact in assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 3</td>
<td>Types and purposes of assessment</td>
<td>Formative assessment, summative assessment, benchmarking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 4</td>
<td>Needs assessment</td>
<td>Participants identify their own assessment needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face workshop</td>
<td>Task and rubric development</td>
<td>National standards Task development Rubric development Best practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 5</td>
<td>Sharing of revised tasks</td>
<td>Task revision as an iterative process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 6</td>
<td>Assessing culture</td>
<td>Intersection of culture and language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 7</td>
<td>Assessment &amp; technology</td>
<td>Computer-based and computerized assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 8</td>
<td>Teacher certification</td>
<td>Identifying instructor goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 indicates, the course began by reviewing basic assessment concepts, which established a shared knowledge base for all participants in the course. Participants also completed a needs assessment to ascertain the assessment needs of their STARTALK programs. After the four introductory modules, participants joined each other in Washington, DC for a three-day, face-to-face workshop. In this workshop, topics from the online course were reviewed, and participants were able to address their more pressing needs for assessments. Working together both within and across language groups, participants developed assessment tasks and rubrics that would be applicable to their own programs. Participants built on the foundation of the online modules, and were able to add the personalized instructor comments to develop assessment tools.
Participants were also able to network and share the features of their own diverse programs, comparing challenges and accomplishments. After the face-to-face workshop, participants returned to their own programs to implement the assessment strategies that they had learned and to complete four more online modules. The content of these modules is included in Table 2, but was determined by the participants, not the course instructors, based on a survey of participants’ needs and interests for further learning conducted at the close of Module 4 and prior to the face-to-face workshop. With a different group of participants, the topics might have varied considerably. Finally, in addition to this new course material, participants were able to continue developing assessments and receiving feedback from instructors, as well as turn to the course instructors for technical assessment assistance throughout the rest of the program.

### 3.5 Measures of learning

Given that the focus of the blended learning course was professional development in assessment, it comes as no surprise that this course included multiple measures of participant learning. Research indicates that high quality interaction in online learning is essential for learning to take place (Goertler & Winke, 2008; Lai et al., 2008). To that end, the learning measures utilized in all components of the blended learning assessment course emphasized interaction and feedback among participants and between participants and course leaders. These measures worked to ensure that participants understood the content and to help course leaders assess their own teaching of the content. Table 3 summarizes these learning measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium of instruction</th>
<th>Measures of learning</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online modules</td>
<td>Quiz</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion board</td>
<td>Multiple per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>Two per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Table 3 shows, multiple learning measures were used in each part of the course to help both participants and course leaders reflect on their learning. The two online components of the course utilized the asynchronous (occurring at different times) and synchronous (occurring at the same time) interactive features of the course to assess learning. Weekly quizzes allowed participants to reflect on what they had learned, and assignments asked students to apply their new knowledge to a hypothetical assessment scenario and write a one-page response. Discussion board topics were posed by instructors at the beginning of each module, and participants were encouraged to respond to each other as well as to the instructors in their posts. Synchronous text chats were also used to encourage interaction. The chats served as a method for participants and leaders to discuss the week’s topic. Leaders held two chats, and participants were encouraged to attend one each week.

During the face-to-face workshop, participants and leaders together took part in multiple discussions and group activities. These measures of learning stimulated creative thinking among participants and allowed them to reflect critically on what they were learning. Further, participants developed assessment tasks and rubrics to use in their own STARTALK programs. The development and iterative revision process for these tasks allowed instructors to make sure that participants were learning the material and applying it to their own situations.

### 3.6 Schedule

The blended learning assessment course took place in the summer of 2008, during which time participants’ own STARTALK
summer programs were also in session. Table 4 outlines the course schedule.

Table 4. Blended learning course schedule.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course component</th>
<th>Sub-component</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online modules</td>
<td>Module 1</td>
<td>Week 1, May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module 2</td>
<td>Week 2, May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module 3</td>
<td>Week 3, May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module 4</td>
<td>Week 4, May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face workshop</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 days, June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online modules</td>
<td>Module 5</td>
<td>Weeks 1-2, June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module 6</td>
<td>Weeks 3-4, June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module 7</td>
<td>Weeks 1-2, July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module 8</td>
<td>Weeks 3-4, July</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the challenges inherent in providing professional development to language educators is that they are almost invariably involved in language instruction during the time in which the professional development occurs. As such, balancing the demands of the course with other commitments can be difficult. To the extent possible, the professional development course in assessment attempted to accommodate the participants’ schedules. One example of this can be seen in Table 4, which shows Modules 5-8 running on an every-twoweeks schedule. This change was suggested by the participants themselves at the face-to-face workshop, who remarked that completing the content-heavy online modules was challenging while teaching simultaneously. This led to the decision to allow two weeks for module completion for the final four modules.

3.7 Outcomes

The goals of the blended learning assessment course were to nurture assessment literacy in STARTALK educators by teaching them basic assessment concepts, identifying their assessment needs,
providing hands-on guidance in developing and revising assessment tasks and rubrics, and helping them to plan for and sequence assessment in their own STARTALK curricula. The measures of learning used in the course suggest that participants did indeed make use of the course. Between 75% and 90% of participants completed the weekly assignments each week. 55% of participants utilized the discussion board, and participants’ average score on the weekly quizzes was 89.98%.

Research suggests that post-program evaluation is key to the success of any distance learning program (Goertler & Winke, 2008). Thus, in addition to the learning measures discussed above, the course leaders also utilized a post-course survey that allowed participants to evaluate their experience in the professional development course. Table 5 highlights the findings from these evaluations.

Table 5. Participant course evaluations (N=18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How well did the workshop meet each of the following general objectives?</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expand your understanding of assessment.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify reasonable outcomes for your STARTALK program.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinpoint specific assessment needs.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share products across STARTALK.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 5 shows, although only 18 of the 40 participants completed the evaluation, those participants generally approved of course content and found the blended learning program to be an effective means of professional development in assessment. Table 6 highlights some of the more illuminating open-ended comments from the post-course evaluations.

Table 6. Open-ended course evaluation comments.
The participants clearly found the course to be a helpful and useful method of professional development in assessment. The blended learning format utilized in this course provides many opportunities and challenges. The following sections explore these opportunities and challenges, and highlight the ways in which the professional development in assessment course was revised in summer 2009.

### Opportunities and Benefits

While we cannot generalize the findings of such a small case study, the approach and outcomes do provide opportunities for further explorations of a blended learning approach. Blended learning offers a multitude of benefits, but the ones particularly pertinent to instructors of LCTLs are those of counteracting relative isolation, time and budgetary constraints, and a pressing need for professional development in a field where instructors who often lack formal teacher training.

#### 4.1 Connecting geographically isolated, disparate educators

One of the daily challenges faced by instructors of LCTLs is the isolation that many of them encounter in their school system or university (Cavella & Malone, 2008). While a school district may have multiple French or
Spanish teachers who can benefit from their shared experiences and materials, it is not uncommon for a school district to have only one teacher of a particular LCTL, or for a university to have a LCTL department composed of as few as two instructors of the language. This limits these instructors’ abilities to network and to remain abreast of the developments in their field. Blended learning professional development helps to combat this. By offering a cyber schoolroom, teachers from across the country (and world, potentially) can encounter each other and learn about other programs and teaching strategies (Cavella & Malone, 2008; Elder et al., 2007). They can share the struggles they face, ways they have overcome challenges, best practices, and other resources they have encountered in the past.

4.2 Managing budgetary constraints

Instructors and administrators of LCTL programs are not only frequently geographically isolated, they often have little funding at hand for developing materials and assessments, or securing professional development opportunities. When funding is available, it is hardly a guarantee that it will be funneled into assessments and assessment training with so many competing demands. A blended learning course makes the case that professional development is feasible for LCTL educators. Blended learning courses can take place at minimal cost to participants, who struggle with shrinking budgets and pressure to economize (Elder et al., 2007; Kraemer, 2008; Nunan, 2002).
4.3 Finding the time for learning

Further demands placed on LCTL teachers and administrators are those of time and time management. In STARTALK summer language programs, as in many other LCTL environments, planning time and professional development hours are at a premium, and can be hard to fit in around instruction. When LCTL teachers also hold other jobs outside of the teaching arena, it becomes even harder to find the time for professional development. The flexibility afforded by an online course can make it possible for participants to fit the course into their schedules, despite countless other demands on their time (Kouritzin, 2002). Further, it has been shown that participants in distance learning courses who work simultaneously can benefit from opportunities to transfer their knowledge from one situation to another (Nunan, 1999), which strengthens the case for blended learning as a model of professional development in LCTLs.

4.4 Creating a shared well of assessment literacy in LCTL educators

Finally, a blended learning course provides an accessible way for LCTL educators to receive formal training in assessment, which is desperately needed in a field where many instructors have not had the time or ability to receive much training at all. The combination of a short, face-to-face workshop with accessible, online learning facilitates the professional development process. The online components of the course offer a way for connections to be made and for information to be dispersed, while the live workshop provides the opportunity for face-to-face discussion, which cannot occur online. The 2008 online course offered a multitude of ways for students to learn and engage with the materials. Asynchronous discussion boards, synchronous text chats, assignments with feedback, and quizzes with feedback all gave users an opportunity to interact with instructors and check comprehension. Eliciting comprehension checks this way ensured that all students were participating, and did not afford them the opportunity to sit quietly as can happen in a live workshop. Furthermore, it was found that participation in and excitement about the online course increased following the live workshop as participants were able to
connect names on a screen with faces and personalities. The enthusiasm generated by the live workshop fueled future online meetings and inspired participants to continue working toward their assessment goals and communicating with each other.

The clear benefits that were seen in using a blended learning format to deliver professional development in assessment were strong enough to encourage course leaders to apply for, and receive, funding to conduct the course the following year, summer 2009. The summer 2009 course capitalized on the opportunities for learning provided by this format. However, the blended learning format is not without its challenges, which will be addressed in the following section, along with the ways in which course leaders attempted to meet these challenges in summer 2009.

Challenges

The blended format is not without its challenges. Significant challenges encountered in the summer 2008 blended learning assessment course included ensuring active participation, working with participants who were geographically disparate, and working with participants’ varying English language proficiency and technological literacy. Each of these challenges appeared in the summer 2008 assessment course, and course leaders attempted to meet them in the summer 2009 course. The following sections detail this process.

5.1 Establishing active participation as the norm

One of the most basic challenges that emerge in the blended learning format of professional development is that of student participation. An effective distance learning environment requires considerable effort on the part of the course leaders when designing and administering the course (Curtain, 2002; Ng, 2007; Restauri, 2004), and further effort is needed once the course has begun. Research suggests that current distance learning environments, while providing high levels of interactivity, flexibility, and feedback, may struggle to maintain participant motivation and involvement (Cavella & Malone, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2001; Kraemer, 2008). The distance learning component of a blended learning course must not only provide feedback, support, and a community to the learner, it must also grant
that learner a level of autonomy and responsibility for her/his own learning (McBride & Beers Fägersten, 2008). In the summer 2008 course, upon giving online participants the opportunity to complete coursework on their own schedule, it was revealed that some students were more self-disciplined than others. One way in which this challenge was met in the summer 2009 blended learning course was to make decisions about deadlines, grading, and awarding credit clear to all participants, and to allow participants to have a stake in the decision making process. Sharing expectations with the participants allowed them to make an informed choice about how involved they would be in the course, knowing the consequences of their actions. Publicizing decisions about grading practices ahead of time also helped instructors be consistent and fair in their administration of the course. Fixed deadlines or strict credit awarding procedures may not be appropriate for all courses, given availability of instructors and how self-paced the course truly is. However, the summer 2008 course showed that these discussions needed to take place between instructors before the course began so that all stakeholders were aware of expectations.

5.2 Accommodating time differences

Another challenge of the blended learning format is the natural consequence of one of the format’s benefits. A blended learning course minimizes geographic barriers between participants, but it is still necessary to consider the implications of working with people in other time zones or even countries. For example, a blended learning course may integrate synchronous chats with other interactive feedback mechanisms. In this case, it is important to consider the convenience and feasibility of the chat feature for all participants. The benefits of a live chat incorporating participants in London, Chicago, and Seattle are clear, but finding a time of day that would be available for all of them might prove impossible. In the case of the summer 2008, blended learning assessment course, it became clear that this was a challenge, leading course instructors to continue to offer two weekly chats in the summer 2009 course to accommodate schedule variation among participants.

5.3 Assuring shared English language and technological literacy
Another clear challenge to the blended learning course format is the varying capability of participants in terms of technological literacy and English language proficiency. Research has reported that technological issues account for many of the problems that participants in blended learning and distance learning courses report when asking for help (Cavella & Malone, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2001). In the summer 2008 course, participants had difficulties with their school system and university firewalls and proxies that did not allow access to online courses or certain course content areas, such as the synchronous chat feature. Further, different participants had different levels of familiarity with computers and Web technology. In some cases, this course was the first time participants had used a login ID and password or participated in an online chat. It became clear to instructors that the initial module of the summer 2008 course, which focused solely on using course technology, was an important component to be replicated in the summer 2009 course, a finding supported by other research (Restauri, 2004).

Participants’ varying degrees of English language proficiency presented a further challenge to this format. Given the different native language backgrounds of all participants, the blended learning assessment course was conducted in English. Research shows, however, that online courses conducted in English can be a challenge for non-native speakers (Cavella & Malone, 2008). In the case of the summer 2008 course, it became clear that the pace of the synchronous chats needed to be slower than had been planned. For the summer 2009 course, project leaders accounted for this when scheduling course chats.

**Limitations**

Blended learning is one approach for professional development but certainly not the only approach. In the case of the professional development in assessment workshop conducted in summers 2008 and 2009, it proved to be a successful format, though not one without its challenges. Lessons learned from the summer 2008 course informed the development and administration of the 2009 iteration, and while it would be unwise and unfeasible to generalize these too much, it is useful to review experiences similar to one’s own situation before creating a new professional development course.
Further research in the area of professional development for instructors in the LCTLs is needed. It is hoped that this case study, grounded in the theoretical issues surrounding professional development for LCTL instructors and assessment in the LCTLs specifically, will provide helpful tools and guideposts for other language instructor educators who are striving to make similar progress in this very important field.

Conclusions

Without valid and reliable assessment of student learning, any language program will struggle to set reasonable expectations for students, evaluate the effectiveness of the program, and prove to outside funders that it should be allowed to continue. This is especially the case for LCTLs, which are generally in a more precarious position than commonly taught, well-established language programs. However, it is impossible to conduct such assessment without instructors and administrators who have a solid grasp of assessment basics. Professional development in assessment is vital for LCTL programs, and a blended learning approach offers one method of successfully providing this development.

References


