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Jambo Bwana Part 2: A Journey in Swahili as an Online Language

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Rights

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Introduction

While the initial article relating to this experience (found here) was truly an experiential discussion on the endeavor, this second part is meant to examine the design of the program, as well as the various styles for teaching language virtually.

Cultural Explorations

In addition to the primary focus of language education built into the curriculum, the topics of each unit related directly to culture or life in West Africa, providing students with a broader understanding beyond language skills. Student projects, as they were not locked to the topic of the unit, could explore significant aspects of West African culture. While the amount of project freedom was difficult for some to handle, both because of a lack of known vocabulary and the challenge of choosing from so vast an array of topics, it did provide interesting opportunities for student research. This was conducted through interviews, search engines, media sites, and news outlets. The students used most technological resources at their disposal to complete their projects with plenty of relevant information.

Furthermore, students visited a leading fair trade wholesaler called Swahili Importers [1], located in Eugene, Oregon. The visit presented culture from a business perspective and also showed the impact of technology on trade. The Internet is a great example because it is a major part of the wholesaler's business. When the program is fully online, there may not be the opportunity for those same explorations outside of the regular classroom and coursework as there were in Eugene.

Technical Impressions [2]

The Swahili program and curriculum are unique in that they genuinely

wish for extensive student feedback and criticism. Students are expected to be in charge of their learning. Deborah Cooke, head of the technology on the program, said very clearly to all students the first week of class, "You have power here. You have control over your learning journey. You have freedom. You have the creative options to explore your own learning path." [3] The Hermes [4] site was designed to be a guide for independent, self-directed learners. It provides clear instructions and expects a person to follow them; for the most part, the assignments are easily navigable. However, there are a few drawbacks with the design program used. Tables are difficult to code in the program, making it impossible to copy and paste tables from the assignment page into the program where they are to be posted because most of them are screenshots. Those tables that are not tend to have formatting issues and extend the unit chapter down quite far, especially when there are photos that are supposed to be matched with vocabulary words. The program also will not allow you to set links to open in a new window, which is very convenient for a student who needs to explore a link but doesn't want to have to find their way back to their course page. All links need to be opened with a right click to avoid this. The only other issues related to the learning management system were simple edits needed – misnumbered or mislabeled items, duplicate titles, etc. It is a very well crafted, detailed system.

The discussion board is generic and very easy to use. It does have a few issues with relation to duplicate titles from the same poster, so if a discussion board topic has the same title twice in a unit, there may be a problem posting it. Otherwise, posting and responding are extremely simple in the discussion board section. Also to be used for interaction was Blogger. [5] Assignments for Blogger disappeared about halfway through the curriculum in Swahili 1. While Blogger is more visually appealing—formatting-wise—than the discussion board, the interactions between students, conductors, and guides were just as easily completed on the discussion board. Blogger appears to be an extraneous item in the curriculum.

Wikispaces [6] was used for assignments that did not need student interaction, unlike the discussion board and Blogger. It also had assigned tasks throughout the course. Students complained they did not understand how to use Wikispaces and so did not do the assignments. However, I had never used the site myself and found it fairly simple to pick up in a matter of minutes. This could be my familiarity with technology, but most high school students today are as tech savvy, if not more so, than I have observed. Blogger received similar feedback. Unless a section is added to the site where each student could post assignments, or submit them to a shared folder Dropbox [7] style, or the conductor chooses to view all assignments on the discussion boards, Wikispaces needs to stay. It has purpose and functionality different than the Hermes site,

so it is not a duplicate to the discussion board in the same way as Blogger.

Another new account for students to set up is a Google+ account. [8] For the hybrid pilot course, this was completely unused and rather useless, as students are not going to participate in a Hangout when they're living two doors apart. With full online course implementation, the Hangout feature on Google+, which is essentially free Skype for big groups, has the potential to be very useful in connecting families with conductors, guides, coaches, and other families.

I mentioned LinguaFolio [9] more than once. It is a fascinating program. LinguaFolio Students may add whatever languages they've studied and up-load evidence to support their claims to various proficiency levels. Evaluators may confirm that the evidence is sufficient and the person meets that level. This program will not expire in the near future; students may continue to have access to it now that they have an account, and could potentially use it to show employers where their language proficiencies lie. This particular technological aspect introduced in the Swahili program – an online language portfolio – is fabulous and has a lot of potential. I would like to see it used at a university level. The only problem I saw with it was the actual uploading or creation of evidence. It is possible the condensed time made it more difficult for students to focus on selecting or creating evidence for specific Can Do statements. It remains to be seen if there are steadier updates during the regular online program.

Online coursework isn't for everyone, though, there are, as of this writing, no norms for evaluating a person's readiness for an online course. Some colleges are using controls to determine who would be successful in an online course, with the different workload and responsibilities that go with it. [10] A language-focused online course would be even more difficult. Such an evaluation of student success possibilities is likely in the hands of the contracting school, but would still be a recommended consideration for student success and retention. The goal of CASLS in this emerging activity of providing online language instruction is to make such instruction easier, so that anyone could potentially benefit from an online course, whether in language or in another subject area.

Curriculum Impressions

The subject matter of the curriculum was culturally relevant, while still remaining interesting and relatable to students. However, the format put the students into conversations with little understanding of how the language worked. The idea was for students to push themselves to learn and to be in charge of their own learning – they were the ones to make it work. However,

all of the students, myself included, felt that we needed at least some structure. My general suggestion is to start the first unit with basic grammar and verbs, then end the first chapter of the unit with the dialogue using what was introduced, rather than beginning with it. I would add new verb tenses and perhaps noun classes through the other chapters in Unit 1, ending each chapter with a dialogue that expanded on what had been learned. By Unit 2, with some kind of a basis already established, I would go ahead and start the dialogue at the beginning and have students look up words they did not understand. From then on, students would have a basis from which to build, and would not feel lost and confused from the first conversation.

There were also strange gaps that, to me, seemed like basic information learned early on in most language programs. This could be my mind coming at it from a traditional language platform, but colors, animals, and foods, are usually learned early on in comparison to medicine, illnesses, and travel. I did discuss this with Director Falsgraf and commented on it earlier in this evaluation. I want to reiterate his point that "Whenever possible vocabulary should be learned for a purpose." [11] I do not disagree with this and even see its importance, but I also want to be able to have a general conversation. Knowing cat, dog, red, blue, and green can help in a very generic sense. The coursework followed two characters – Asante and Sarah – on their respective journeys in Tanzania and Kenya. Through them, we explored language and culture. While some students did not care for the story-based curriculum, I did not mind at all – I felt we could relate to the characters and build an image of the event through their activities.

I would still like to see some more common phrasing in the curriculum. I also feel the need to point out that we skipped sections in their entirety due to the time constraints of the hybrid intensive pilot course. Given more time, it is possible that during those sections we would have covered some of the items that felt strangely absent. When reviewing my ideas with Director Falsgraf, he commented that what I was pushing for was too comfortable a scenario. "Learning another language is not comfortable. Whether you are learning naturally in country or in a classroom, when confronting another culture and language you have to be uncomfortable. Giving lists of 'expected' vocab and testing students on exactly what they have been taught is comfortable, especially after 10+ years of being enculturated into this system." He did go on to clarify, though, that it doesn't work to frighten people too greatly with something different, and the unfamiliarity combined with a few of the other items discussed about the program may have contributed to some of the points discussed in this article. There is perhaps a middle ground to be found for what I see as an improvement still in keeping with the ideas of the program and its unique, challenging learning style. I did agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Falsgraf when

he ended with, "We'll get better." [12]

The downside to the hybrid intensive that I feel may be corrected in the fully online course is a need for reinforcement. I mentioned it previously in the article, but it bears mentioning again. Immediately after the course, I could exchange polite conversation on a very basic level and perhaps throw in a few descriptions and sentences about familiar topics. Months later, I can still handle the greetings because we used them so often. I may remember several of the numbers, but we didn't count very high. I cannot tell time. For a year's worth of Swahili, my retention is very low with the effort everyone put in. This can be addressed for future intensives by repetition and reinforcement of material every day in the classroom, and also by adjusting the course schedule. I consider a year of high school language as equal to approximately one semester of lower division college language, which is four credits at Pacific. [13] Doing four university credits in three weeks is quite an undertaking. However, when doing 10 units of upper division university credit in eight weeks, I still had more free time than in the Swahili course and did not experience the same level of burnout. Students need more free time to absorb and unwind during the course.

In an online environment, it will be especially important for the Swahili families to support and reinforce each other, as there will be no instructor there in front of them. My other concern with the fully online course is Swahili conversation. Students will meet with the conductor, guides, and coaches to work on their conversation. The Fall 2012 course was designed to include several one-on-one appointments with coaches to work on conversation skills in an individualized fashion, and students were to be encouraged to utilize those abilities with other participants in the program. I do feel that observing the students as a group conversing with each other and the conductor would be beneficial as a way to see group dynamics and encourage comfort among family members with communication. [14] Focusing on the currently studied unit would be very helpful with both reinforcement and pronunciation improvement. Students may also retain more from the simple fact that most will be doing it on school computers in a semi-proctored environment, with less ability to distract themselves on other internet sites. The results of the fully online fall pilot will be presented by Director Falsgraf in a Berglund Center Roundtable in May 2013.

Online Language Learning Comparison

Over 152 million results appear when one searches Google for "online language learning." On the first page are familiar faces – Rosetta Stone, Live Mocha, etc. [15] It is curious that online education is so integrated into society,

especially in an upper education echelon , when studies show the national average success rate is only about 50%. An online course is typically more difficult for students, not easier, as they require greater levels of self-discipline, not to mention strong academics and tech savvy. [16] Some researchers assert that "retention rates are 20% lower in online courses than in traditional face-to-face courses" [17] and that "retention may be improved by including face-to-face orientations or other face-to-face elements in online courses." [18]

I briefly touched on successful online learners, but wish to reiterate here that they are "motivated, independent, [and] self-directed." These students also "enjoy technology, have strong language skills, and are visual learners... They have positive attitudes and are willing to ask for help. Extroverted students are often more successful in socially interactive courses, while more introverted students tend to succeed in self-paced courses." The success of these students is also affected by the instructional method, such as frequent and timely instructor feedback,. Additionally, the use of various tools to support group activity, individual coaching, and speaking practice can make up for the lack of consistent instructor interaction inherent in an online course. "A combination of flexibility, independence, and experience with online tools has been associated with improved critical thinking, research, and computer skills." [19]

With this framework in mind of how a person is successful as an online language learner, let us consider a few comparisons to the new CASLS Swahili program.

Portal Zweite Chance (Portal Second Chance) [20]

This site is free and available in German only. Of special interest aside from the typical vocabulary and grammar exercises, it provides a self-evaluation and diagnostic testing to place students at different levels. It then automatically builds a learning plan based on level, curriculum, and the student's availability, which can be adjusted. Each week is evaluated and then the next is provided, individualized for the student. This provides quite a bit of independence and self-pacing as well as an automatic ability to advance when a level changes. [21] In comparison, the Swahili program does not provide a pre-evaluation as it is unnecessary for first year beginning students, but it does provide continual updating on progress through LinguaFolio. It also provides direct interaction through the conductor/guide/person-who-interacts setup. Currently, there are no grammar exercises particularly designed for the Swahili program, though it is heavy on the vocabulary.

Rosetta Stone [22]

You practice, you drill, and you listen quite a bit with Rosetta Stone. It is not structured in a particular context and you are not required to follow a set progression. There is no interaction with other people on this program in its usual form and it is best used in conjunction with other coursework or language practice, rather than by itself. It is generally easy to use and usage can be tracked by instructors. [23] It now offers an option called Totale, ringing in at approximately $1000, that includes RosettaCourse (basic Rosetta Stone), RosettaStudio (video chat with native speakers for interaction), and Rosetta-World (online language-related games community). [24] With Totale, Rosetta Stone upgrades from basic software that supports language but does not teach it to a fairly comprehensive program with a hefty price tag. CASLS provides a contextual story-based learning environment, guaranteed interaction with various individuals, language production and usage through projects, and peer interaction. Although it does not provide language-related gaming, the CASLS program does many of the same things with a more student focused approach.

Tell Me More [25]

A major competitor of Rosetta Stone, this program teaches words and phrases but also "includes a speech recognition component that analyzes pronunciation, presents a graph of speech, and suggests how to perfect it." There are also videos displaying how to physically make the sounds. [26] At $390 a year for six languages, it is a much better price point than Rosetta Stone, but it does not offer as much as Totale. The speech recognition is an interesting feature, but face to face with a native speaker, such as with the CASLS program, surpasses the computer based evaluation.

Livemocha [27]

New to Pacific University this year, Livemocha offers free basic lessons in any of its 30 languages with monthly or bi-annual subscriptions providing additional content and levels. For monthly users, eight recordings may be submitted for native speaker evaluation and recommendations, and for bi-annual users, two language examples per lesson may be submitted. All users have access to social networking groups and VoIP native speakers who in turn wish to learn English. [28] There is no set instructor for this program, as there is with CASLS.

Perhaps the most glaringly obvious issue with many online language learning tools is the lack of consistent contact with a native speaker (unless there is a high price to go with it). "The quality of feedback is important," according to Mike Levy, head of the School of Languages and Linguistics at Grif-

fith University in Brisbane, Australia. "Sites with human contact work best," he said. "This shows the advantage of humans compared to computers. A computer is never as subtle or intelligent." [29]

Furthermore, in today's learning community, social networks and the theory of social constructivism are key to successful online learning communities, such as the families, clans, and tribes in the CASLS structure. Other programs have similar communities, but not to the structured, integrated level the Swahili program entails. Students create relationships and deal with real-world problems and projects, evidenced in the unit topics and the continuing stories of Asante and Sarah. "The ideal way to learn language in any situation or for any student has not been found. But one thing technology based language instruction must respect is the need for a cultural dimension to language learning….Any separation between language and the cultural context within which it functions is artificial. Language can't be separated from culture. Culture is language." [30]

But the question remains: how successful was the Swahili course in its pilot intensive phase? In order to be considered successful, the new system from CASLS needs to equal or exceed traditional language education results. Creating a solid basis of familiarity in East African culture was also a goal of the program. The success is mixed. While the students did learn much about East African culture in depth, including through numerous self-guided projects, they did not meet the proficiency goal of the program (Novice High) when examined by the CAP test.

Conclusion

If student interest is the key, then the program was successful; student surveys show 14 of 15 students feel motivated to continue studying Swahili, 14 plan to take Swahili 2, and 12 would take another Swahili summer course. 13 out of 15 felt the Hermes site was easy to use, as was the discussion board (10 out of 15), and the instructions for assignments were understandable (14 of 15). It is clear that students felt they did not have enough free time, as they disagreed with the statement "There was enough free time to prepare my project and explore campus" (13 of 15). 11 of 15 felt the class was too fast.

That being said, the more interesting results come from the Swahili exam taken by the students in Week Three. Scores 1-3 are novice levels, with 4 and up transitioning into the intermediate level. The test was multiple-choice reading comprehension, with the number and complexity of questions varying based on the students' scores as they progressed through the exam, followed by writing and speaking exercises to be graded by instructors. Due to time constraints, those portions of the exam were not graded, but the results of the

multiple choice section are very interesting. Below is a raw data table on the overall scores. My own score is highlighted in yellow, showing me very much at Level 1 (beginning novice) with many of the other students. Highlighted in blue are some interestingly high results. To protect the identity of minors in the course, no identifying information such as year in school or Swahili in the home is included below.

Table-1. Report for College Readiness Academy, Class CRA-Swahili-2012.

Panel Name	Benchmark	Level	Test Time	Test Path [31]	Raw Score [32]
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	17 min.	RS,1E,2E	13.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	28 min.	RS,1E,2E	14.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	13 min.	RS,1E,2E	15.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	14 min.	RS,1E,2E	16.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	24 min.	RS,1E,2E	17.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	14 min.	RS,1E,2E	18.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	16 min.	RS,1E,2E	18.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	20 min.	RS,1E,2E	18.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	19 min.	RS,1E,2E	19.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	20 min.	RS,1E,2E	19.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	27 min.	RS,1E,2E	20.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (C)	1	16 min.	RS,1E,2E	21.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (A)	3	26 min.	RS,1E,2M,3M	30.0
Swahili Reading	Beginning (A)	3	34 min.	RS,1E,2M,3M	33.0
Swahili Reading	Transitioning (C)	4	72 min.	RS,1E,2M,3H,3M	39.0
Swahili Reading	Transitioning (C)	4	48 min.	RS,1E,2M,3H,3M	47.0

For a year's worth of Swahili, my expectation was to see students in the Beginning Intermediate to Beginning High range (2 or 3) but that was clearly not the result. Most of us did not retain the information and were frustrated by an inability to handle the proficiency exam. In no way were the instructors "teaching to the test." On the one hand, teaching to the test is an oft lamented style, but on the other hand, taking a test with no reference to the material is frustrating for the learner. 75% of us scored as true novices after the intensive, without consideration for writing and speaking exercises. I know my own writing and speaking exercises on the test were hardly high quality. Considering the two 3's and the two 4's, I conclude that those particular students either thrive in the style of learning environment around the course, utilized outside sources effectively as the program is designed to supplement their learning, or had prior knowledge of the language (i.e. heritage speakers). I am unable to confirm the impact of possible heritage speaking on the scores due to student privacy. Ultimately, I find myself disappointed with the scores after the course, but still hopeful that the program has the potential to bring more of those 3's and 4's to the other students with a little work.

Notes

[1]   Swahili African Modern. (2012) Swahili Imports. Retrieved from http://www.swahili-imports.com/.

[2]   Cooke, D. (2012a). Personal interview on 27 July 2012.

[3]   Cooke, D. (2012b). Personal interview on 10 July 2012.

[4]   Swahili. (2012). University of Oregon. Retrieved from http://hermes-fire.uoregon.edu/swahili/.

[5]   See: http://www.blogger.com/.

[6]   See: http://www.wikispaces.com/.

[7]   See: http://www.dropbox.com/.

[8]   See: https://plus.google.com/.

[9]   See: https://linguafolio.uoregon.edu/.

[10] Jenkins, R. (2011). Why Are So Many Students Still Failing Online? Do Your Job Better. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Are-So-Many-Students-Still/127584/.

[11] Falsgraf, C. (2012a). Online interview on 25 Sept. 2012.

[12] Falsgraf, C. (2012b). Online interview on 10 Oct. 2012.
[13] See: http://www.pacificu.edu/.

[14] Falsgraf, C. (2012a).

[15] Online Language Learning Search Results. (n.d.) Google. Retrieved from http://www.google.com/.

[16] Jenkins, R. (2011).

[17] Ali, R & Leeds, E. M. (2009). The Impact of Face-to-Face Orientation on Online Retention: A Pilot Study. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 12(4). Retrieved from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter124/ali124.html.

[18] Brau, M., Christian, S., Hill, B., McNair, D., Sandoz, S., & Taylor, C. (2010). Success and Retention in Online and Hybrid Courses. *Lane Community College*. Web. Retrieved from http://www.lanecc.edu/sites/default/files/assessment/hill-onlineteachinglearning2010.pdf.
[19] Kelly, M., Kennell, T., McBride, R., & Sturm, M. (2011). Fast Forward: An Analysis of Online and Distance Education Language Training. New Media Language Training, Inc. Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Retrieved from: http://atwork.settlement.org/downloads/atwork/CIC_Fast_Forward_Online_Language_Training.pdf.

[20] See: http://www.ich-will-lernen.de/.

[21] Kelly, M. et. al. (2011).

[22] See: http://www.rosettastone.com/.

[23] Kelly, M. et. al. (2011).

[24] Taub, E. A. (2010). The Web Way to Learn a Language. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/28/technology/personaltech/28basics.html?_r=3.

[25] See: http://www.tellmemore.com/home.aspx.

[26] Taub, E. A. (2010).

[27] See: Livemocha.com

[28] Taub, E. A. (2010).

[29] Taub, E. A. (2010).

[30] Kelly, M. et. al. (2011).

[31] Test path consists of a series of bins. The first bin (RS) is the instructions, survey and sample item. The other bins each contain 15 items.

[32] Total items taken vary according to test path.