12-17-2012

Jambo Bwana Part 1: A Journey in Swahili as an Online Language

Nicole Nowlin
Berglund Student Fellow

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Nicole Nowlin

Introduction

“Forget almost everything you know about learning languages to this point.” That was one of the first things I heard from Carl Falsgraf, the Director of the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon in Eugene, on the first day of the pilot course for Swahili language.¹ I initially learned of this course at another language meeting with a professor from Pacific University. At Benkyoukai in June, with several Japanese teachers present to discuss the future of the language, Carl introduced a new form of online language learning. It was to premier with two pilot programs that very June – one in Swahili, and one in Chinese, before going fully online at several high schools in the fall.² While Chinese did not enjoy the hybrid pilot as Swahili did when July rolled around, the possibilities for the program were too good to pass up.

I’m a sucker for language – and for things Internet related, thanks to the Berglund Center. Off I went on my merry way to join Carl and the CASLS crew at Swahili camp. My fellow campers? About a dozen high school students from different places, all there to learn the critical Swahili language. The pilot course was designed to provide a full year of high school language instruction in three weeks (Sunday to Saturday) with full days of classes every day and additional activities at night. Using the online host, Hermes³, as a base for the curriculum rather than a textbook, the intensive course was to be taught in the classroom with two alternating teachers. Students would spend one day “skill getting” (learning concepts and chapters) and the next “skill using” (creating projects in Swahili and presenting). There were also interactive portions of the curriculum to be spent on Hermes, the online content management system. Sound familiar? It should. Many college students are familiar with sites like Etudes⁴ and Moodle⁵ for online courses, with no face to face interaction with the teacher necessary. Hermes, named after the Greek messenger god⁶, was designed to be that system for Swahili– but there is much more to it than a simple message

¹ Falsgraf, Carl. Personal interview. 8 Jan. 2012.
² Falsgraf, Carl. "Benkyoukai." Personal interview. 1 June 2012.
CASLS describes it as:

*A revolutionary approach to online language learning. Hermes leverages new social networking and communications technologies to provide the key to language acquisition: Interaction. Research shows that without interaction, students will not develop communicative abilities... sitting in front of a computer and responding to prompts will not lead to communicative ability. Hermes not only provides meaningful interaction, but organizes young learners into social communities that tap into their natural desire to socialize through a medium in which they are comfortable and builds global competence and 21st century skills.*

The program does this by putting students together in families, clans, and tribes. Families are students at the same level in the same language at the same location. Clans are at the same level and in the same language, but may not be in the same location. Tribes are learners everywhere at different levels. The students must use digital tools to record their activities and progression, as well as to interact with native speakers. The system is designed to use three types of educators – trained teachers as “conductors,” assistant teachers as “guides,” and other native speakers as “coaches.” The conductors are professional teachers who handle everything from curriculum to IEPs and grades. Guides assist the conductors and have both language fluency and pedagogical training. Coaches are like cultural conversation partners and are slated to come from overseas universities in countries using the language. For Swahili, this would be primarily Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.7

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Swahili speaking countries

Map of Swahili speaking regions
Carl describes the central challenges of the new learning system as “transitioning to a culture that recognizes the inherent human desire to learn, that information can be obtained cheaply and quickly, and that learning is a fundamentally social activity. The gaming economy, social structure, curricular approach, and evaluation system... are designed to create this educational culture as well as lead to efficient learning.”

The use of a gaming economy – wherein students start the course with a certain amount of currency to trade for tutoring and evaluation – is designed to stimulate the idea that proficiency means success in the “game” and therefore brings more “money.” Also, much like a person playing a game, the student moves at their own pace through the program. A unit is approximately two weeks in the full program, leaving time for project work over the course of two weeks if a student finishes right on time. A student who moves faster in the course could have more time, or less time if they move slower, which would then impact the quality of the project. In the summer pilot, students did an entire unit in one day, and spent the next day working on the project. While the school year academic program will have letter grades, the summer pilot was not grade-based. The purpose was not to say, “You must do ____ to achieve ____ grade.” It was to encourage students to take charge of their own learning and success, both as an individual and as a group.

In order to be considered successful, the new Hermes system from CASLS needs to equal or exceed traditional language education results with a much lower cost. The pilot year (and summer) will be used to gather data to this effect, some of which will be included in the conclusions portion of this evaluation. The actual cost per student for this program is equivalent to the cost of a face-to-face teacher with 30 kids a class for five periods a day. However, districts only pay for the number of students who actually take the class, allowing for greater efficiency of teaching and funding utilization. In a school that has dropped languages, adding Chinese or Swahili online with no need for an on-site instructor or a minimum number of students makes it possible to offer language learning opportunities once more.

With an eye, then, on the success or difficulty of using the program, I will expand further into each week as a participant in the program alongside the high school students. Much of my evaluation is based on my own experience; I will not be quoting any students here, but I will reference that I received feedback from the group. This is to protect the identity of minors involved in the pilot program with me. My own experience takes into account my history with online education programs, learning multiple languages, an intensive language course, language acquisition coursework and research, and general technical knowledge.

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9 Falsgraf, Carl. Personal interview. Various dates.

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Week 1 Swahili course

Nicole’s Schedule

Sun Jul 8 – Sat Jul 14, 2012 (Pacific Time)
Let's Go to East Africa!

In this story, you will meet Asante and Sara. They are two students from America who are preparing to embark on a trip to East Africa. Asante is an African American boy who is very talented and interested in long distance running. He would like to take this opportunity to train and run with Kenyan athletes. Sara is a Caucasian girl who is interested in art and photography as a result she would like to submerge herself into the culture (jad) of East Africa as well as take great artistic pictures of the wildlife. Meet Asante and Sara in the audio podcast below.

Let's Go! Click on the circle in the blue box below.
**Week 1 (See page 69 for schedule)**

The first week of classes started with skill getting first thing Monday morning. We were scheduled from breakfast until almost bedtime, if you were an early-to-bed, early-to-rise sort. We were provided a calendar of activities for the week so that we would know our schedule, and then we dove headlong into the first unit of the curriculum. We were told to “think of it as a book with nine chapters.” Hermes and the curriculum it presented was essentially our textbook for the program. However, it wasn’t really a textbook – it was a set of assignments and exploratory directives. We were instructed to add vocabulary words to the *kikapu* (basket) for everyone to build our own vocabulary list.

We jumped straight into learning greetings and discussing what a person needs when they travel to West Africa. We took the English vocabulary and used things like Google Translate¹¹ and African Languages¹² to translate the words. We were encouraged to explore and add to the list, expanding our own vocabulary and that of our classmates. This would become a dominant theme in the course; exploring and learning independently, as well as frequent use of online translators. By the end of the day, we could handle basic greetings and a few other words like “what” and “where.” We knew a bit about life in West Africa from the dialogues and assignments. However, we did not successfully complete a unit in a day and rescheduled the first skill using day to Wednesday, so that we had two consecutive days of skill getting.

It felt a bit like an immersion course; you are tossed in and you have to learn and retain to keep up, just as if you were in another country and they didn’t speak your language. Repetition and usage are big parts of that retention; being week one, it remained to be seen how that would pan out in the course itself on a daily basis. The instructors (Marko Mwipopo and Furaha Wa Bulugu) were very engaged and responsive to the students, but there was no real integration of the online site except to pull content from it for discussion. When we left for the day, we were unsure if we were meant to complete all of the assignments on Hermes as instructed on the site, skip the ones that were done in class, or not do any at all. I endeavored for the first week to do all of them regardless, to see how they worked out. There is more discussion on the technical side of the program and applications in a later section specifically on that topic.

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When skill building time came, students chose to do individual or group projects on a topic of interest. It was to be written and presented via PowerPoint or another method. The goal was to have increasing usage of Swahili in each project until they were done entirely in Swahili. It was part of the evaluation of the project to use Swahili in the writing and the presentation. However, after days one and two, we knew greetings, time, question words, some basic questions, family terms, feelings, and numbers, plus whatever was added to the kikapu. There was little known vocabulary to use to write the projects, sending us back to the translators for assistance. This was partially intentional; we were to use our own methods of acquiring the information. However, as can be seen in my first project (essay, PowerPoint), there was a long list of vocabulary words I did not fully understand, but used anyway. I did not feel prepared to write or present a project in Swahili on most any topic, save perhaps the same basic travel phrases everyone else knew too. There was no formal grammar instruction in week one, except to recognize noun identifiers for people, languages, and countries, which also made it difficult to understand what I was writing. Being an experienced language learner, I jumped in head first for the projects and I used the online translators to the fullest extent I could. However, the list of unknown words grew with each consecutive project, even as I began to recognize a few I repeated in my writing.

The continued lack of integration with the online portion of the course remained a stumbling block through the week. Students were given iPads to use in the course so they would have internet access to Hermes for the learning management system usage. I used my regular laptop and eventually formed a habit of copying the tasks for the unit into a Word document and deleting them after we did them in class or I posted them online. Often I did both in the first week. The Hermes site was extremely easy to navigate, and held direct links to the other programs we were assigned to use (Google+, Blogger, LinguaFolio, Wikispaces). I set up my accounts in a matter of minutes for all sites concerned, but heard some confusion and discontent from the other students regarding difficulty with signing up or using the unfamiliar sites. The Internet remained a constant challenge, as well, for many students would be disconnected or unable to connect at all at various times throughout the day, myself included. I more often saw the students on sites or apps unrelated to Swahili than on the program itself.

We were introduced to LinguaFolio in week one. This particular program lists the

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13 [https://docs.google.com/open?id=OB-KokyNnx-MjdyeTnhUV1yVVE](https://docs.google.com/open?id=OB-KokyNnx-MjdyeTnhUV1yVVE)
14 [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1sk9I_dBlYeqw6W2cEeCLLbVq3sSjnMTjDL6t4Eb2zY/edit?pli=1#slide=g568fdaea_Z_93](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1sk9I_dBlYeqw6W2cEeCLLbVq3sSjnMTjDL6t4Eb2zY/edit?pli=1#slide=g568fdaea_Z_93)
17 “LinguaFolio Online.” CASLS. University of Oregon, 2012. Web. [https://linguafolio.uoregon.edu/](https://linguafolio.uoregon.edu/)
goals of the course at different levels, such as novice low, novice mid, and novice high, via Can Do statements. The student is able to select whether the statement is a goal, can be done with help, or they can do it on their own. Once they can do everything in the Can Do statement on their own, the bar on the visual graph of their progress fills up. If it is not completed, it displays bubbles to show progress. Each Can Do statement may also have evidence uploaded to support it, such as a written project, PowerPoint, link to a video used for listening practice with a note about how much was understood, or a video/audio file of the student themselves doing something related to the statement. There was no evidence uploading during week one; it was mostly exploratory in nature as we familiarized ourselves with the site. (See next page for LingauFolio Picture)
## Jambo Bwana Part 1: A Journey in Swahili as an Online Language

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By the end of week one, my overall impression was of surprise. I was using some items (greetings, family words, numbers) but I didn’t retain as much as I expected, and I was still somewhat confused about how the digital side was integrated into this hybrid course.

**Week 2** *(see page 75 for schedule)*

The start of week two saw a marked change in how the course ran between classroom and online curriculum. Rather than reserving online curriculum for completion after class, the instructors began projecting these materials in the classroom and had the students run through the exercises all together. Expansion was possible with teacher interaction, and also the teaching was more streamlined than week one. This pattern of improvement was important and reasonable for a pilot program. Being the first students running through the curriculum gave us an opportunity to identify where a unit held too much content to complete. At least one unit a week went unfinished, though the instructors worked hard to put as much content into their class hours as possible. Students had a better grasp of what they needed to do in the online arena relative to the face-to-face teaching, and participation in the discussion board picked up in response.

Project work and in-class exploration followed much the same pattern as week one – increase the Swahili used and expand your own knowledge through digital sources like translators. Students did not feel they were learning adequately with the constant use of translators and lack of repetition. While my projects continued to be long and fully in Swahili, I recognized that my vocabulary lists were as long as my essay and I only remembered content, not exact vocabulary. When I worked with students on projects, I encouraged them to do much of the research and writing, then had them work through the translations to sort and define the new vocabulary. It could be overwhelming depending on the subject matter. I found that topic choices grew increasingly more difficult in week two, but the vocabulary learned (foods, medicine, sports, etc.) many times was not related to the topic chosen. Greetings, numbers, and family terms – learned in the first week – were retained well by all, as they were continually repeated each day. However, when one unit ended and another began, there was not much repetition of previous topic-specific terminology to aide retention.

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There was also regularity to the schedule by week two that left students with very little free time. Evening cultural activities happened most nights, making homework an unwanted burden. Few of the students expressed much activity with assignments not completed in class, as they were taking what time they could to unwind. Living in dormitories was unfamiliar for most as well, but they built up a strong family-like community that interacted positively in the evenings when they had no more scheduled events. It was towards the end of week two where burnout began to become an issue with the students. Following the grant evaluators visit at the end of week two, more changes came that freed up the students to feel less of a time crunch. Perhaps due to the burnout, participation in the online community declined as well.

Week two would perhaps be the smoothest of the three weeks, as students were into the routine despite approaching burnout. The technology issues were mostly sorted and integrated, and participation online reached its peak on the discussion board before declining into week three.
### Week 3 Swahili Course

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*Note: Times are in Pacific Time.*
Week 3 *(see page 78 for schedule)*

Week three continued the integration of the online system and the classroom work rather successfully, but also saw major schedule changes based on student and evaluator feedback. Everyone was feeling the burnout and needed more time to breathe, which led to a review session and a special extra session that focused on things the students wanted to learn. It was week three, the last week of the course, and we hadn't learned colors or animals or much grammar – all things many students expect to learn in a course pretty quickly. The review session was wonderful and actually made doing project work all the more interesting. Students took the initiative to do projects based on noun classes and verb tenses, to fill in more knowledge. I too felt the pleased disbelief on the part of CASLS that students were actually asking for more grammar.

When I brought up these seemingly basic topics, Director Falsgraf made a pointed rebuttal about expectations in a language course verses the actual necessity of vocabulary learned. While colors and animals are basic things that come to mind, where is that in importance compared to the items learned in the course, such as illnesses? “If you learn the vocabulary you need rather than the vocabulary you expect, you should be more engaged and motivated to learn it,” he explained. Colors and animals are not high on the list of necessary things to learn, I concede, but what I recall most about wanting those items was my inability to use them in a basic conversation. I wished to discuss pets or point out the color of something, and could not have that simple exchange. There is something to be said both for pushing the necessary vocabulary and allowing students to expand on subjects through the independent learning and projects that are a big part of this program. A broader framework of basic vocabularies may assist in the repetition usage necessary to retain the language, as students are able to use more of it in conversation on a regular basis. All in all, week three was quite different from the first two weeks and, despite being strange schedule-wise, was perhaps the most enjoyable. We learned things in week three that were building blocks for Swahili 2 (like grammar, verb tenses, and noun classes). This would help our success in the next course, starting Fall 2012.

With the course nearing its end, students participated in the CAP test to gauge their Swahili ability against established standards. It is important to note that the CAP test is a proficiency test, not an exam based on any particular curriculum. The purpose is to gauge language ability regardless of the curriculum provided in any given course, and identify students’ level of skill on an established scale. The exam displayed low proficiency among the majority of the students in this course, myself included, which

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is an issue to be examined and mitigated by CASLS for future courses. Students were expected to score around novice mid or novice high (a 2 or 3) but average scores did not hit that range. The exam did not ask questions related to much of what was covered in the Hermes course, and with little expanded vocabulary and verb knowledge, it was hard to guess at it. Being a university graduate, I have taken my fair share of tests, and this was perhaps one of the most frustrating, for it illustrated more of what I had not learned than what I had learned. Despite understanding that the test was not designed to test course knowledge, it is still a frustrating experience as a student to feel as though you do not know enough to take the exam at all.

On the last day of classes Students also realized everyone would be going their separate ways after the performance and party that evening, which led to a flurry of Facebooking and tears, highlighting once more the bond created among the members of the group – our Swahili “family.”

Summary

Overall, the course was a fascinating whirlwind and an excellent opportunity to learn a language about which I knew so very little. While the curriculum needs work and the technology needs streamlining, the potential for the program is impressive. I do not see this reaching a university level immediately, but as a supplement for schools that are losing language courses it is an incredible opportunity. CASLS received extensive feedback throughout the three weeks and will undoubtedly learn more over the course of this school year. The final results of their pilot are yet to be seen, but I am hopeful of their success given their willingness to take feedback and genuine desire to see this through. Online education is a growing reality; what better opportunity to keep language in our schools, and who better to do it than CASLS?