

# Guidance for Ohio Schools and Districts Considering Online World Language Course Options and Commercially Available Language-Learning Products

## I. Introduction

Traditionally, world language teachers have served as the primary facilitators of language learning in a classroom-based model. The learning of world languages occurred largely at school during class time. Only infrequently and through unusual means did language learning take place at other times and in other places.

Recent technological advances have greatly expanded the means by which students can interact with the world and learn other languages. Online language-learning options now bring teachers to students, no matter where they might be in the world or what time of the day it is. Commercially available language-learning products provide an increasing array of nontraditional learning resources for language learners of all sorts.

One indisputable fact is that today's students are wired to the world 24 hours a day, seven days a week, through their laptop computers and mobile devices. Content is available from a variety of sources and from experts online, often free of charge. Indeed, today's students have a vast world of knowledge readily available at their fingertips. If they learn something of interest in school, they know they can find out more about the topic with just a few clicks. Consideration of these modern student characteristics by schools and districts is now critical when subscribing to online language learning instruction or supplementing classroom instruction with commercial language-learning tools.

The increased availability of online courses and commercially available products in the past 10 years has given students greater access to a wide range of nontraditional language-learning options. Among these options are glitzy, commercially available, language-learning products that tout miraculous language-proficiency results. These products are being aggressively marketed to both schools and learners. For those school or district officials charged with making sense of all of these options, it is easy to become quickly overwhelmed. This trend and the resulting confusion have placed increased attention on what constitutes a quality online course or an effective commercially produced language-learning tool.

Fortunately, the understanding of what is required to design a quality online world language course or what constitutes an effective language-learning tool has deepened significantly in recent years.

This resource guide briefly examines the essential components of effective online world language courses and commercially available language-learning products in four contexts:

- today's world language learners;
- the increased emphases on credit flexibility and accountability;
- best practices in the field of world language study; and
- growing interest in blended instructional approaches.

It also presents a number of questions that should be posed by those charged with selecting online language learning options and commercial products to help determine their appropriateness for student use. If used correctly, this guide should assist Ohio schools and districts to weigh effectively the pros and cons of the growing multitude of language-learning options that exist outside of the traditional world language classroom and help educators make informed selections for their students. As a result, students' access to a growing number of nontraditional resources should be expanded through informed decision-making.

## **II. The Essential Components of Effective Online World Language Courses and Commercially Available Language-Learning Products**

In general, high-quality online world language courses and commercially available language-learning tools should incorporate:

- clearly defined, rigorous content tied to state and/or national content standards;
- effective and easy-to-use ways for students to interact with and learn the content;
- design elements that attract and maintain student interest;
- customized learning for students of differing ability levels;
- a focus on language function (communication) rather than form (grammar);
- performance-based learning activities and assessments – both formative and summative; and
- highly qualified instructors (courses) or free, easy-to-access technical support (courses and products).

For a number of years, the world languages content area has been the only area with a coherent K-16 system of standards and assessments. Indeed, nearly every state's world language content standards reflect the nationally recognized and accepted *National Standards for Language Learning in the 21st Century*, authored by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Standards Collaborative. Courses and products whose curricular content does not directly correlate to these national standards should not be considered.

Both for online courses and commercially available language-learning products, ease of use is very important. Students must be able to focus on the content being learned without being distracted by cumbersome programming, irrelevant graphic displays or advertisements.

For example, courses and products that misuse students' time through lack of streamlining in the design, slow downloads and/or unfriendly user menus will receive a lukewarm reception at best from students who are accustomed to using modern and efficient technologies.

For both courses and commercially available products, users should have free and readily available access to technical support if they have questions or experience difficulties with any aspect of the learning tool they are using.

Courses and products that are appropriate for students include lessons and assessments that are built around themes and topics relevant to the age and cognitive abilities of the groups being targeted. Courses and products that take into consideration different learning styles are preferential to those that do not. Appropriate courses and products also use technologies that enable the teacher and/or learner to customize the learning experience through a variety of tools and formats such as video, interactive features, supplemental resources and links to related information for learners of differing ability levels.

Design features that provide accommodations for children with special needs and physical limitations should be present. For online classes specifically, the course design should allow the teacher to adjust the scope and sequence of instruction to meet students' individual academic and learning needs. Courses and products that are worthy of consideration should require students to use higher-order thinking skills and reinforce 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills.

Several other important issues should be factored into the selection of a quality online world language course or commercially available product. First and foremost, the course or product must be proficiency-oriented and communicative in nature. In other words, the course or product should provide as many options as possible for real-time communication and interaction with proficient speakers of the language. It should provide students with frequent opportunities to use the target language in the various modes of communication: interpretive listening and reading; interpersonal speaking; and presentational speaking and writing.

The course or product must be replete with rich cultural content, which should be embedded in the learning contexts of each lesson. In addition, look for reinforcement of concepts and skills from across the curriculum. To accomplish this, the course or product should incorporate a generous number of authentic texts and audio samples and a variety of culturally authentic visuals representing the countries where the language is spoken. They also should provide access to up-to-date (non-static) news and information that is appropriate to the age and cognitive capabilities of the learners.

High-caliber online courses and commercially available language-learning products focus almost entirely on functional (communicative) language use, not on form (grammar). Courses and products that place heavy emphasis on rote memorization, repetitive drill work and grammatical accuracy have minimal utility for most learners and are not in keeping

with modern communicative language-learning theory and practices. Courses and products that drill discreet language aspects (e.g., spelling, verb conjugation or word agreement) in excess can easily kill students' interest in learning the language.

For online world language courses, a few additional elements should be present. With regard to student assessment, high-quality courses will incorporate performance-based instructional activities and assessments. Frequent assessment – both student self-assessment and teacher assessment of student progress – should be regularly employed to provide learners with the feedback that is necessary for proficiency to increase. Frequent formative assessment also will afford the instructor with adequate opportunities to gauge student readiness for the next lesson or unit. Student performance – not time-on-task – should be the principal indicator of student readiness to move on to more challenging content.

Finally, a highly qualified instructor is essential for the success of an online course and/or the deployment of a commercial language-learning tool. Online instructors should understand the theoretical underpinnings of communicative language learning and have the ability to put theory into practice when setting appropriate learning goals for students, determining acceptable evidence of proficiency gains, creating assessments, designing instruction and selecting appropriate learning materials. These instructors must demonstrate the technical prowess to incorporate all of these essential elements through an online medium.

Regardless of program-delivery model, world language teachers will always be a vital resource for the language-learning experience. These trained professionals are uniquely qualified to guide student language learning, help students set reasonable and attainable proficiency goals, assess learning outcomes and properly incorporate the use of commercial tools into the overall language-learning experience.

### **III. Questions to Pose to Potential Online Language-Learning Providers and Vendors of Commercial Language-learning Products**

Prior to subscribing to any language-learning course or purchasing a commercially available product, interested stakeholders should seek answers to the following questions to make an informed decision:

#### **1. What are the stated learning goals of the course or product?**

Goals that relate to improving language proficiency, emphasizing learning to communicate in the target language, and/or framing learning within the contexts of real life are best.

#### **2. Is the course or product aligned to the *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and/or Ohio's *K-12 Foreign Language Academic Content Standards*, and if so, what solid evidence is provided to substantiate this alignment?**

Many courses and commercial language products purport alignment to state and national standards, but in reality are aligned loosely or not aligned at all. Be cautious and look closely for evidence of strong alignment to national and/or state learning standards.

#### **3. What percentage of course or self-study time is dedicated to functional language use versus the percentage of time that is dedicated to language form (i.e., grammar and syntax)?**

A significant majority of course time or self-study time should be dedicated to functional language use. Courses and commercial products that focus on grammar rules and non-interactive uses of the language (e.g., repetition, drill work) are not desirable.

#### **4. For online courses, what percentage of instructional time is delivered via synchronous (real-time) instruction versus asynchronous instruction?**

Research shows that language instruction that is rendered solely in an asynchronous manner is markedly less effective than instruction that is delivered using a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Without significant opportunities to interact with instructors, peers and other users of the language in real time (synchronous delivery), students will be challenged to attain the proficiency needed to engage in increasingly complex communication.

Conversely, students can benefit when a portion of the instruction is provided through asynchronous delivery. This can afford periodic opportunities for reflection and participation in other language-learning activities like blogging, participating in discussion threads, researching, etc.

Schools and districts would be wise to consider a blended approach to language learning. Blended learning is a formal program that allows students to learn both face-to-face and online in an integrated fashion so that both methods of instructional delivery support and enhance one another. In blended programs:

- 1) instruction delivered via one method cannot be done in isolation from the other; and
- 2) learners have some element of control over time, place, path or pace of learning.

**IMPORTANT:** Commercial online products which purport to offer a blended approach because they incorporate an online experience and an instructor on the side for occasional interaction and feedback do not meet ODE's criteria for a high-quality program of blended language learning. These products would be used best to supplement or enhance a truly blended approach which incorporates a significant and appropriate degree of instruction provided by an Ohio licensed instructor of the language being taught as is required by Ohio law.

**5. For online courses, with what frequency can students expect to interact with the instructor and the other students in the course using the target language? Does the delivery of this course provide the learner with a sense of community?**

More is better! At a bare minimum, students should have an opportunity to interact with the learning facilitator (e.g., online teacher, heritage peer coach) and/or other learners on a weekly basis. Daily interaction is preferable. The majority of today's online learners are most comfortable when they sense they are part of a larger community. This is a critical design element.

**6. For online courses, what are the qualifications of the instructor of record?**

Under current statutes, the instructor must have a valid Ohio teaching license for Ohio students to receive credit for the course. The teacher's bio should be readily available for inspection by district officials, students and their parents.

**7. How often can students enrolled in this course or using this product expect to receive constructive feedback?**

For students' language proficiency to progress steadily, ongoing formative assessment and frequent constructive feedback are essential.

**8. What modes of communication (interpretive listening and reading, interpersonal speaking and/or presentational writing and speaking) are targeted for use by students in the program or course?**

Any course or commercial product that does not require learners to use the target language in all of these modes of communication will be much less beneficial than those that do integrate them.

**9. Does the course/product make good use of technology capabilities to provide an effective language-learning environment?**

An effective language-learning environment is one that provides students with authentic (i.e., real life) contexts for using the language, incorporates authentic learning materials (e.g., texts, videos, artifacts) and creates opportunities for interaction with native speakers.

**10. How is instruction differentiated to ensure that all learners attain the stated learning goals of the course or program?**

Courses or commercial products that rely on one manner of presenting instruction will not meet the diverse needs of language learners. Activities developed for different learning styles and personalized pacing should be incorporated into the course or product to address specific achievement gaps or to take advantage of accelerated learning abilities. High quality courses and products also will accommodate students with special needs and students with physical limitations.

**11. How will students be assessed to determine if they have attained the stated learning goals of the program or course?**

The course or program should state learning goals in a clear, student-friendly format at the beginning of each unit of study or instruction. There should be a strong correlation between the stated goals and the assessments students are given. Courses and products that provide students with concise rubrics prior to an assessed task or activity are preferable.

Courses and products that measure student success based solely on language form (i.e., grammar, syntax, vocabulary) rather than on functional ability to communicate in the language should be avoided. Courses and products that use performance-based assessment to gauge student progress are ideal.

While some assessment questions may focus on discreet language elements, they should be embedded in an authentic cultural context rather than being isolated factoids. Learners should have ample opportunities to demonstrate how they can use the target language through writing and speaking prompts and integrated performance assessments.

**12. After students have completed a traditional world language course, an online language course or finished using a commercially available language-learning product, how can one be certain that they have made adequate progress in terms of building their language proficiency?**

The use of nationally recognized assessments of language proficiency is ideal. Examples include the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), the Writing Proficiency Test (WPT), the National Online Early Language Learning Assessment (NOELLA), the Collaborative Articulation and Assessment Project (CAAP) test, and the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP). For additional information

and a full list of recommended assessments, refer to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) Credit Flexibility Implementation Guidance Document for World Languages by clicking [here](#).

**13. How can one ensure that learners earn credit for participation in an online language course or other nontraditional language-learning opportunities?**

Ohio's new provision for credit flexibility requires all public school districts, community schools and chartered nonpublic schools to adopt policies that enable students to earn units of high school credit based on a demonstration of subject area competency, instead of or in combination with completing hours of classroom instruction.

For guidance on how to award students credit for language proficiency gained from participating in an online course or from other nontraditional language-learning opportunities, consult ODE's Credit Flexibility Guidance Documents for World Languages at [this link](#).

**14. What opportunities exist for students enrolled in this course or who are using this product to engage in higher-order thinking, employ critical reasoning and use 21<sup>st</sup> century skills?**

Carefully consider the merits of courses and products whose designs do not clearly incorporate higher-order thinking skills (e.g., Bloom's taxonomy) or those skills identified as critical for 21<sup>st</sup> century readiness (e.g., [Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills](#)).

**15. How is the study of associated cultures integrated into this course or product?**

Inherent in every language are the products, practices and perspectives of people who speak the language. Language courses or commercial language-learning products which do not embed rich culture in every lesson and which do not prompt students to consider cultural similarities and differences should be avoided.

**16. Will students have access to culturally authentic texts, audio files and other materials in the target language? Are culturally authentic visuals used in the course or the product?**

Functional language proficiency is the result of students' ability to use and react to authentic texts, audio and visual stimuli, and cultural cues from the target language. Courses and products that do not incorporate the use of significant amounts of these types of culturally authentic stimuli are apt to be ineffective. Products that use the same texts and images for multiple languages often reinforce cultural biases and stereotypes and should be avoided.

**17. How easy is it for novice learners to navigate the online course or use this product? Is orientation or training available to students who enroll in this course or use this product prior to its initiation?**

Courses and products that are not intuitive or easy to navigate can impede learning and frustrate students, resulting in poor performance and hampered learning.

Research indicates that students who receive orientation or training prior to participating in a course or using an educational product generally outperform those who do not receive this preliminary support. Studies also indicate that students who receive orientation training prior to taking an online course or using a commercially available product also are more apt to finish the course or use the product until a natural ending point is reached.

Courses and products that offer training on how to be an online or technology-based learner are preferable.

**18. What technical support is available to the instructor, students and school coordinators in the event of a problem? Are there guidelines regarding how soon a learner can expect an answer to an inquiry?**

For courses, make sure support mechanisms are in place and easily accessed by all stakeholders. Try to ascertain if learners will receive prompt responses to their inquiries, especially when technical problems arise. Commercial products should provide a toll-free number for free, 24-hour customer support.

**19. What are the hardware, software and Web browser requirements for this course?**

Take careful note of these requirements to ensure that learners will not be hindered in any way in their ability to use all of the elements available through the course or product. Verify that courses and products will work across different platforms. School and district firewalls and other Internet security features also must be taken into consideration.

**20. What prerequisite technology and language skills are required by students who enroll in this course?**

Some things to consider include: keyboarding ability, knowledge of word processing and other commonly used software programs, online collaborative skills, ability to navigate a virtual reality environment, prior language study, a minimum proficiency level required to guarantee success, etc.

**21. For online courses, are multiple school schedules (e.g., block, 4x4 and traditional) accommodated? Are students able to work outside the confines of the traditional school day?**

Language learning should no longer be confined to the limits of the standard class period or the traditional school day. Today's 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are accustomed to having access to learning resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week. High-quality

courses and products should facilitate language learning whenever a student has the time or desire to work.

**22. Are there any hidden costs associated with enrolling in an online course or purchasing a commercially available product?**

Carefully check to ensure that the course or product doesn't require the purchase of additional software, a different operating platform, enhanced security measures, hardware the school or district doesn't already own, additional costs for technical support, etc.

## **IV. Conclusion**

In summary, use of the criteria outlined in this document can greatly assist schools and districts seeking to identify and select high-quality online courses for student subscription. They also should prove useful in screening the many language-learning products that are commercially available to learners that might be used to supplement a blended instructional approach.

Commercially available language-learning products may supplement – never replace – classroom-based instruction or other distributed learning scenarios. At the time of this writing, ODE's world language specialists were not aware of any commercial products on the market that could adequately serve as a stand-alone alternative to distributed world language learning opportunities characterized by a certified world language instructor and sufficient interaction with other speakers of the language. Schools and districts must balance the ever-present need to economize with the minimum requirements of world language learning best practices.

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