Chinese Language Teaching

Solving Teaching Problems

http://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/hierarchy/info/showcase/exemplar/chinese

Introduction

A full honours degree in Chinese has been taught in Oxford since the late 1940s. The nerve centre of the present teaching programme is the Institute for Chinese Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford. A special unit within the Institute, the Centre for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CTCFL) has been developing computer-assisted teaching facilities for over ten years. The centre teaches Chinese for Oriental Studies and Social Science degree courses. At present we have about 70 students on different degree courses.

Drivers for using WebLearn

Although the CTCFL has its own website offering centralised learning resources for students, it is mainly content-based. Tutors have tried to offer online feedback for assignments via web forms and email. It was soon discovered that this was not a satisfactory solution due to the nature of the website.

The motivation for using WebLearn arose from the desire to solve teaching problems. For example, the Oxford term teaching pattern (eight weeks on and six weeks off) is not beneficial to learning any language, as it lacks continuity. The CTCFL has been looking for an answer to this problem, and believes that multimedia and internet-assisted learning methods are the answer.

How has WebLearn been used?

The WebLearn site was designed to supplement classroom teaching. The following teaching and learning activities are implemented in WebLearn:

- Communicating with students about the work they have learned in class and online
- Discussions about teaching and learning methods
- Offering additional support to problems reflected in student assignments
- Revision lessons during vacations
- Joint creation of student reports by the language teachers.

The following is the most commonly used teaching pattern for an elementary Chinese language group in WebLearn:

A language tutor uses the Announcements tool to warn the students that some activities will take place at a certain time and tells them to pay attention to their study group web page in WebLearn.
For example, the students might be asked to read the materials in Resources first and then submit their work via Assignments. The tutor could also publish the same notice in advance using Calendar. After posting a set of language exercises in the Assignments area with clear instructions, the students can submit their work online. Everything is carried out online: the tutor marks the assignments and sends feedback to the students. The tutor can also communicate with individual students via the Mailtool if necessary. All the submissions are stored online for this particular study group. When the tutor has downloaded all the submissions and analysed each student’s work, he or she might post another Announcement and call for an online tutorial using the synchronous Chat Room.

Students can raise their individual questions about the assignment that they have just completed. A Chat Room tutorial may take place at any agreed time and in any location where the internet can be accessed. After the Chat Room tutorial, the tutor summarises the main points raised and posts them to all students, again using an Announcement. Alternatively, the students may use the Search facility to find the relevant topics in WebLearn.

**Impact**

Both teachers and students report that WebLearn offers a well-designed learning environment. As it is based on an open-source system, the feedback from users can inform the VLE development team, resulting in continuous improvement of the teaching and learning tools in WebLearn.

Use of WebLearn in the course is not only an improvement on previous language laboratory systems, but also helps us to overcome some traditional problems in language teaching, especially in the teaching of listening, speaking and reading skills. For example, the CTCFL sets assignments for students on WebLearn and uses the Chat Room to answer students’ questions. The students feel that all activities in the WebLearn course are practical and beneficial to their learning in addition to it being easy to use.

**Reflection and looking forward**

The language tutors in the Oriental Institute were introduced to the new WebLearn in December 2008. As more people started using WebLearn, a number of tailored workshops have been scheduled for the next academic year (2009-2010). The plan is to explore the system further and to modernise language teaching methods in Oriental studies. Ongoing informal evaluation will provide feedback on how students learn in a Virtual Learning Environment so that improvements can be made to the system and the way that we teach. To make the WebLearn implementation smoothly, my suggestions are:

- Getting the departmental IT officers on board at the early stage when introducing WebLearn
- With the help of the departmental IT officers, practical workshops on teaching with WebLearn should be held within departments on a regular basis for users to compare notes and share experiences.
- Regular two-way communication between IT officers, practitioners and OUCS is a key for successful implementation of WebLearn.

*Shio-yun Kan and Fawei Geng, June 2009*