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Cal State system to offer Web-based language labs

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Students at the Monterey Bay campus of California State University soon will be able to learn Japanese in a Web-based "virtual language laboratory."

The virtual lab is the result of an agreement between a Finnish technology company and the Cal State system that will eventually allow students to communicate with language teachers from their home computers.

CSU officials said Tuesday the initiative will serve as a model for similar "remote-learning solutions" in colleges across the country.

In addition to Monterey Bay, three CSU campuses -- Chico, Long Beach and San Diego -- will offer Japanese. The Sacramento, Dominguez Hills and Los Angeles campuses will offer French. Other languages will be phased in over the next several years.

Hopes for growth

CSU hopes the virtual labs will spread throughout the 23-campus system, where almost 25,000 students are already in some type of distance-learning program.

“It’s where education is going,” said Tuomo Lehtovirta, president of Teleste Educational Ltd., a division of Teleste, the international technology group.

Lehtovirta said he envisions a day several years down the road when Internet connections on cell phones, Palm Pilots and other hand-held devices will be fast enough to hook into virtual labs and classrooms.

Traditionally, foreign language classes have been available only in individual learning centers on CSU campuses. Through local computer networks: students can talk only to language instructors on their own campus.

But the virtual language lab will allow students to tap into databases at many Cal State campuses and download a range of interactive learning materials developed by CSU and Teleste.

The system will enable students to communicate using Internet voice technologies both offline and online with the instructors, Lehtovirta said.

The initiative initially will take advantage of the high-speed T-1 lines on Cal State campuses, he said. But eventually, he said, students with high-speed Internet access at home will be able to download video and audio files and have live video conferences while in their slippers.

Pooling students

One problem facing language students at the 360,000-student CSU is that classes -- with the notable exception of Spanish -- can be hard to fill. But combining students from several campuses will make it easier for Cal State to offer more classes.

“Realistically you can’t offer a course for a handful of students,” said Ken Swisher, spokesman for the CSU chancellor’s office. “But if you get five handfuls, that’s a lot.”

Swisher said the Japanese curriculum for the initiative is being developed. The French curriculum will be developed in the spring.

In January, he said, students will begin testing the new technology, and the first virtual language labs be ready next fall.

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