

## **LANGUAGE LEARNING ON THE WEB: FINDING THE GEMS AMONGST THE PEBBLES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Resources on the World Wide Web are growing at breakneck speed and at a volume that is beginning to overwhelm even the keenest of surfers. While the body of materials available for language learning may be small by comparison with other subjects, it still gives rise to two concerns: the wheel is being reinvented in all sorts of forms and; as a result, it is becoming harder to find the gems amongst the pebbles.*

*This paper discusses the findings of an extensive survey of approaches to language teaching and learning via the WWW. Its aim was to find exemplars of best practice in stand-alone courses, integrated mixed-model courses (Web/CD-ROM/face-to-face), and interactive exercises for the development of all 4 skills (some of these sites will be demonstrated). The findings suggest that, in some languages, resources are already so plentiful that it would be more economical to integrate the best of them into existing courses and to focus energies on global co-operation in the production of new high quality materials.*

### **KEYWORDS**

WWW, teaching and learning, languages, co-operation, web resources.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Web is bewildering in its variety. Where languages are concerned, we know that an enormous amount of work is being done to put a wide range of materials on to the Web, including whole courses. What we do not know is how to access this material efficiently.

The problem is first of all one of size. Exploring one site in detail is already time-consuming. Exploring all available sites is at the very least daunting and may be impossible in practice and the problem grows by the day, as sites multiply. This is happening notably in the major world languages that dominate the teaching system, but sometimes even languages of rather low enrolment are not exempt. What, for example, do we make of the fact that at least three different sites teaching the basic structures of Swahili are simultaneously under construction?

What we see everywhere on the Web is an ever-expanding multiplication of sites at all levels – individual exercises, courses of varying ambition, mega-sites that seek to catalogue everything available in any one language or even in all languages together. Search engines do not provide a great deal of help in this environment, because the problem is not to identify the myriad of sites available, but to evaluate them and discover not only what each does but also how well it does it.

This paper reports on an extensive survey of language resources on the Web aimed at making sense of what is there, identifying the centres of excellence, and suggesting ways in which the resources can most sensibly be used for language teaching and learning. This paper cannot give a full account of all the material, which is about to appear in book form (Felix 1998a), but it reports the major findings, and gives demonstrations of the most interesting example in each of three important categories: stand-alone courses; integrated courses and individual interactive task-based exercises. It will also briefly look at the attractions of the Web for language teaching and learning, along with some of the problems involved and suggested solutions.

## **2. THE ATTRACTIONS OF THE WEB**

A quick browse through the many resources listed in Felix (1998a) will make the attractions of the Web clear. Some authors (Blyth 1997, Goelz 1998) spell out the advantages that they see applying to their own materials, while one (King 1998) also mentions the disadvantages of Web-based learning (particularly refreshing since this is one of the sites that charge fees for access). We do not need to take the authors' word for the advantages, though: just watching students interact with the best resources is enough to explain the frequent reports of improvements in motivation and attitude towards language studies that result from working in such environments (Atkinson 1998).

For teachers, one great advantage of the Web is that it offers easy access to a large variety of resources. Where these have been produced, as they often are, by professional teams supported financially by publishers, they are likely to be of excellent quality. As such, they will always be hard to match by individual teachers struggling with limited resources in educational institutions. In some languages, there is so much material available that teachers could almost put together an entire course by choosing segments from the categories listed in Felix (1998a) and adopting the most suitable textbook. Near-total outsourcing may be an excessive, unpalatable and unrealistic ambition, but teachers could certainly outsource a significant part of their teaching to the Web. Of course, the process first of selection, and then of incorporation into an existing program, is not cost-free and will involve some investment of time, but the returns on the effort are promising, and the end result can be a well rounded teaching approach, richer than anything that teachers can hope to put together from their own resources.

Even if teachers are resistant to the idea of using somebody else's course and insist on developing their own sites with all the expenditure of time that involves, they can still use the Web profitably to add ready-made elements to their material and to make available resources that would otherwise be lacking, rather than reinventing the wheel when time is in short supply. Use of Web courseware will require negotiation with the authors, but there seems to be a remarkable generosity of spirit among the creators, with some making it clear that the materials are freely available to all. There is even one site where the authors proclaim their willingness to provide individual feedback without charge, but that level of generosity is very rare and it is hard to believe that it can be sustained. Computer-based feedback, on the other hand, is very common, and might be expected to grow in sophistication over time.

In the commercial world, we can expect publishers like Prentice-Hall and Heinle & Heinle to be keen to make the sites which are based on their textbooks generally available, since they constitute a strong marketing tool. Beyond this, however, there are masses of sites in the public domain: no language classroom need ever complain about lack of access to authentic material when the Web allows students to visit the target country with its cities and museums and other cultural sites, to read newspapers, to listen to radio and perhaps even to watch television and films. Here, what the Web offers teachers is not so much a ready-made list of classroom activities on the Web – though it does offer that – as examples of what other teachers have been doing, and an inspiration to learn from them and incorporate the same approaches into local courses.

For students, where the formal curriculum is concerned, there is potential for greater flexibility regarding the time and place of learning: a course wholly or partly on the Web provides constant access to learning materials, and may offer the extra benefit of communicating with fellow-students and the teacher via email or a discussion group.

In addition, the Web offers a wide variety of experiences beyond the confines of the curriculum. These include, most crucially, authentic experiences of the target culture, both guided and unguided, since the Web offers students a space in which they can roam freely as well as a source of material for any exercises that they may be set. Beyond this, the Web also offers the possibility of authentic exchanges with native speakers in Chat and MOO sites. In other words, what it does is to bring the target culture and language not only into the classroom, but also potentially into the daily lives of students.

### **3. PROBLEMS OF THE WEB**

Despite the attractions of the Web, it would be foolish to ignore the drawbacks. Today's Web is a volatile medium. The often used term *World Wide Wait* is not far-fetched if you are working at home with a slow modem connection or trying to access resources in the middle of a server upgrade. On a computer that is not state of the art, it can also be difficult or impossible to download the plug-ins that are a frequent feature of Web sites, graphics, sound and video can take a long time to load, and response rates can be very slow, especially for resources that predate the use of Real Audio and Real Video.

The Web is also not immediately user-friendly. To the uninitiated a wonderful resource like the Beginners' German materials at the University of Victoria (Goelz 1996) can look like an enormous maze in which it is easy to become lost. The aspects that make the Web an exciting tool for teaching, especially the emphasis on constructivism (O'Haver 1998), problem solving (Boud & Feletti) and collaborative learning (Warschauer 1996), can create confusion and disorientation. Navigation is also not helped by the volatility of sites: familiar graphics change, resources are added or restructured, and, at the extreme, sites can move or disappear completely.

In addition, most resources were created for a specific purpose and a specific audience, and most importantly for a specific environment which with few exceptions includes face-to-face instruction. It would be foolish to assume that clicking into a Web resource will generate the same opportunities as in a classroom. Materials are not neatly structured as they are in a familiar textbook and the bigger the resource and the more complex the links to other relevant sites, the greater the chance of ending up somewhere bewilderingly unexpected.

### **4. DEALING WITH THE PROBLEMS**

Some of these problems need to be tackled by the developers themselves. One obvious need is for site maps, helpful navigation systems and front pages that give a clear explanation of what the site does. More sites need to switch to Real Audio and Real Video, or perhaps better still provide sound and video exercises on CD-ROM for speedier access (this approach cuts across the easy access to the materials that is a great attraction of the Web but makes sense in integrated courses where the teacher may anyway be buying the appropriate textbook). As long as access rates are so slow, developers need to consider in each case whether the use of sound or video adds an important dimension to the learning experience: in principle, the ability to hear the text is always going to be a great benefit, but the disadvantages are also real.

In general, the user needs to recognise that this is a different way of learning, and to adapt to the differences in exchange for the convenience of time and place independence. This is as it ought to be: there is no point simply reproducing on the Web what can be done in a book. That has not stopped some authors simply putting books out there, but the real need is to exploit the advantages offered by the medium and to avoid or reduce its disadvantages. (An interesting discussion of combining CD-ROM and Web developments for this purpose can be found in Burston 1998.)

Good hardware, good software and an excellent ISP will take care of a large part of the speed problem. As an encouraging example, over the six months that it took to collect these resources in three locations, the Web was too slow to work with only twice, ironically enough once on the occasion when a presentation of the materials was scheduled for colleagues!

The problem of feeling lost in cyberspace usually dissipates with experience. It is quite amazing to watch the ease with which young students navigate complex sites, and the speed at which even the most timid novice adapts to the new and challenging environment. This is not to say that everyone takes to the medium like a duck to water. The fact that quite a number of students and teachers resist the use of technology for a variety of reasons is well known (Felix 1997, Gillespie & McKee 1998, Meunier 1997), although most of these observations were made during the previous CD-ROM era.

## **5. WHAT IS ON OFFER?**

The major focus for the survey was to discover what sorts of sites are available, and which offer high quality examples of what can be done. What follows is a selection of sites in three categories – stand-alone courses, integrated courses and individual activities.

### **5.1 WHOLE STAND-ALONE COURSES**

Sites in this category offer on-line courses with varying degrees of substance in terms of content and feedback structures. They are available either to enrolled students at the host institution, or more generally on a fee-paying basis. Fees vary widely across courses, ranging from US \$19.95 to several hundreds of dollars. At least, those were the figures as this article went to print, but fees changed several times during the course of the research, so this is clearly an area of some volatility. Two courses were found for Chinese, two for German and two for Italian. The following is the most outstanding Italian example:

#### ***5.1.1 Cyberitalian (Garau 1997)***

Cyberitalian is an extensive site which offers a beginners and an intermediate course using cheerful Pinocchio graphics. The discourse throughout is friendly and unthreatening: ‘Did all that grammar scare you? Relax...’. The site is very sophisticated, offering a choice of activities (message board and chat according to level), cultural tidbits, extensive exercises with feedback (including scored exams), interactive exercises along the lines of those described in 5.3 below, a gallery of articles about Italy in both English and Italian, and links to other relevant sites. It is described as a ‘meeting place for people wishing to understand Italian culture and language’. The site uses Real Audio as well as WAV and is the only site so far that includes use of a downloadable recording device. With this students can record their voice and compare it to the original (a discussion of the use of speech recognition devices in language learning software can be found in Felix 1998b).

Lessons 1 and 2 (beginners level) and lesson 12 (intermediate level) are available for trial before registration. Costs are very reasonable compared to other resources of this (and lesser) quality. US \$14.95 will cover one year’s membership of the Circolo di Pinocchio and access to the beginners or intermediate course costs another US \$19.95 per level. Advanced level course materials are under development. Principal developers are Maura Garau and Paolo Vacchina in New York with extensive input from others. Cyberitalian is registered as a company.

### **5.2 INTEGRATED MATERIALS**

Sites in this category incorporate Web-based materials into a larger package which includes other texts, CD-ROMs or video resources. While they also include face-to-face teaching at the host institution, their Web materials are freely accessible by anyone. We have found such resources in French, German, Portuguese, Italian and Vietnamese. The following is the most impressive example in French:

#### ***5.2.1 first year french@ut austin (Blyth 1997)***

This is an excellent model of a well designed combination of face-to-face teaching and computer assisted learning materials, co-ordinated by Carl Blyth at the University of Texas. The Web materials consist of extensive grammar exercises with feedback all based on the textbook, and task-based interactive projects (along the lines discussed in 5.3), neatly constructed around

single topics. The site's most outstanding feature is its clarity of approach and user-friendliness. The Web front pages – highly recommended as models – provide a clear outline of the approach and the content.

### **5.3 IDEAS AND PRO-FORMAS FOR INTERACTIVE EXERCISES**

The sort of exciting opportunity provided by the Web is best reflected in interactive task-based exercises for the development of all four language skills. In contrast to standard grammar exercises, this category offers opportunities for meaningful, contextualised work which can be carried out alone, in pairs or in groups. The best examples tend to be materials linked to textbooks and supported by publishers. These sites are plentiful in the major European languages with lots of duplication occurring, but very few such activities have been identified in Japanese, Indonesian and Chinese. We have included some of the best examples in two groups.

#### ***5.3.1 Information gap***

The first group of sites lend themselves beautifully to exercises involving some form of information gap which has to be resolved using language as a communicative tool, with the learners having a limited influence over the outcome. In *Adesso* (Di Fabio & Hemment 1997), students collect information from linked sites in response to the questions they have been given, fill in charts, and prepare materials such as an advertisement for a famous café.

While most such tasks in a variety of languages are presented on pro-formas that then have to be printed and delivered physically to the teacher, some can be submitted electronically. They range from self-contained short tasks in the exercise on Bavaria (Prokop 1997) to extensive problem-solving activities in the Chinese Long Walk (Clayton 1998). This type of interactivity can also be created in MOO and Chat sites (Truna 1995a, Fanderclai 1995). One example is the treasure hunt in Truna (1995b) where a variety of objects are left in different locations of the MOO for students to discover. Another is the topic-related discussions suggested by Ferguson (1998).

#### ***5.3.2 Experiential learning***

The second group of sites offer a range of experiential learning, involving users in a quest with a meaningful goal, or in the production of materials, or, most challenging of all, in real interaction in authentic or virtual true to life settings.

Where quests with a meaningful goal are concerned, two examples are collaborative researching of Indonesian newspapers for a class home page (Elliott 1998), and finding vacation accommodation through real estate sites in France (Blyth 1997).

Where producing materials is concerned, this is becoming a common part of the students' learning experience. The tasks might include writing something like the advertisement mentioned above, creating a cyber community through collaborative narratives (Truna 1998), designing a greeting card in a choice of 14 languages, or taking part in a competition to produce a collage representing the student's view of Singapore. A substantial example is the collaboration between American and Polish students in creating sophisticated Web pages giving a picture of their campuses (Debski 1997).

Where authentic interaction is concerned, MOO and Chat sites in the target country offer extensive opportunities, as I discovered when I was testing *Planet Talk* in Germany and was subjected to a grilling to prove my *bona fides*. Even at a less threatening level, students have to discover where people are, who they are and why they are there, and then engage in meaningful interaction, if they are to keep their respondents interested. A wonderful aspect of this environment is the possibility of communicating through assumed identities which can have a liberating and empowering effect (Turkle 1995).

## **6. HOW TO MAKE BEST USE OF THE RESOURCES**

In the new world of the Web with its continual advance in technology, there are not many maps to tell us how to make the best use of what is on offer, though there are discussion groups where teachers can exchange ideas. What follow are two groups of suggestions about what might be done, both by teachers who wish only to exploit existing resources and by those who want to develop their own resources.

### **6.1 INTEGRATING WEB MATERIALS INTO EXISTING PROGRAMS**

The Web is a mine of resources just waiting to be exploited, with a wide range of materials that can support language learning inside and outside the classroom. It provides opportunity for self-directed extra-curricular work, but teachers will want to look at what is there, and consider whether and how it can be built into the curriculum. The most effective approach may be to find a good course with interesting Web-based activities that is integrated with a textbook, and simply adopt that textbook. This has such powerful advantages in terms of time saved as well as of the author expertise exploited that it might be the very first strategy to consider.

If any work on the Web is to be included in the curriculum, however, and not just offered as an optional extra, there needs to be a way for it to be evaluated, and for the results to be collected and reported. From this point of view, the sites of publishers are attractive, since they can establish an email link to the instructor which will report the results of tests marked by the computer, but also forward for marking free compositions composed on the screen, like, for example, essays on the site which students have been visiting.

Whether or not teachers wish to take advantage of formal course material, the Web offers a window into the target culture which is of enormous benefit because it is so far beyond what can be offered in the classroom. Satellite television may be a rival, but the strength of the Web is that it is an interactive medium and requires active participation on the students' part. It is hard to imagine that any language program would not be strengthened by integrating work on the Web into the curriculum.

The good thing about developments on the Web, from the teacher's point of view, is that it now provides a variety of examples of how such links have been built into others' courses and therefore a variety of models exist from which teachers can profit when thinking about how they want to exploit what is there.

### **6.2 GLOBAL CO-OPERATION AND COMPLEMENTARY DEVELOPMENT**

For teachers who prefer not to be just consumers of material but creators of new Web sites, the current state of play should sound at least a mild warning. The fact that so many sites are exploiting the same territory raises questions about efficiency and effectiveness. Duplication of beginners courses in the major languages seems particularly irrational. There may be no more reason for publishers to avoid competition over Web sites than over beginners textbooks, but the phenomenon of open access University sites that duplicate each other is more perplexing. Staff cannot have large supplies of spare time to spend on doing what has already been done – even less, on doing badly what has already been done well – so the alternative of co-operation seems desirable. Instead of producing half a dozen more or less identical beginners courses, the same amount of effort might lead to one or two such courses – either jointly developed or the work of one particular team – leading on to several courses at higher levels. The need is most obvious in the small languages: perhaps Chinese, Japanese, French, German and Spanish can take care of themselves, but the expert labour available in Korean, Russian, Portuguese or Arabic, for example, is so limited that the costs of duplicated effort in the form of missed opportunities will be high.

## 7. CONCLUSION

What the survey of the Web makes clear is that a lot of resources supporting languages are available. It may not be true yet that we can simply log on to the Web to learn any language that we choose – it may never be true, if only because learning a language in that isolated context is a very big challenge – but the Web already offers a wide range of materials that can support language learning, including learning in the classroom, along with a variety of models from which teachers will be able to profit when thinking about how they want to exploit what is there.

One problem with the material is duplication. This adds to the difficulty of identifying centres of excellence, but also represents a sad waste of scarce expertise and time. It would be much more sensible to embrace a co-operative model which would invest the scarce commodity of time most in producing a range of complementary courses. However, the fate of good advice is often to be ignored and the difficulties of getting people to work together should not be underestimated. Apart from anything else, co-operation sits uneasily in a system characterised by competition, and, in any case, the problems of copyright and intellectual property are significant.

It is unlikely, therefore, that the other big problem – making an informed selection among everything that is on offer – will ever go away. Publishing a survey of sites is a first step towards developing a critical guide which maps the territory and saves wasted hours of search time. However, since the Web is evolving so rapidly, with new sites appearing all the time and old ones occasionally disappearing, it might be thought that any such guide will date rapidly. That is only partly true: work done on substantial sites that are on-going and sites linked to University courses are unlikely to disappear overnight – will continue to be valid. All the same, an eye needs to be kept on them in case they change radically, and attention has to be paid to newcomers, the material will need to be updated regularly if it is to continue to be useful.

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