

Perception and reality: bridging the Internet gap

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In this paper we attempt to relate Internet use to realistic MFL teaching practice. This is done both critically and practically, and in the light of a survey of teachers' attitudes. We define different Internet functions, identifying intrinsic pedagogical advantages and constraints. Internet use is placed within the frame of existing language learning methodology.

MOTIVATIONS

Language learners and teachers in the late nineties increasingly find themselves unable to resist the pull of the Internet. Part of this compulsion is undoubtedly the pushing of technology by interested parties: the NCET (now BECTa) has said that the Internet "cannot be ignored" because it "is currently receiving considerable attention in the media and has become so prominent" (NCET, 1995). If there is any market push, it would appear to be coming from hardware and software companies rather than from classroom practitioners desperate to use the Internet. In higher education, many researchers work in the hope that "Internet-based teaching will allow educators to accommodate more students with diminishing funds" (Thomas *et al.* 1998: 149).

The same language teachers frequently operate within a general culture of disaffection from, or lack of confidence in, Information Technology (IT). In an earlier study of general IT use in modern language classrooms, Gray (1997) found an under-use of existing resources, with modern languages departments working in isolation from school provision, and consequent difficulties in access to technology and its integration into normal classroom practice.

In purely educational terms, however, the World Wide Web and email offer language professionals the twin virtues of topicality and authenticity. The Internet provides uniquely powerful facilities to cross borders and dive headlong into a *bain linguistique* of authentic texts and communicative possibilities. The value of the Internet to teachers and linguists is still, however, largely more

potential than actual, more commercial promise than educational practice. We often make do with a rather vague idea of what it might be able to do for us, and feel our way forward in the dark, through the promise of lists of further page addresses. When the NCET remarks that "our knowledge of the true potential of wide area networking technologies for education is comparatively limited" (NCET, 1995: iv), it is with enthusiasm rather than caution.

PEDAGOGIC VALUE OF THE INTERNET – SOME TEACHERS' RESPONSES

Whatever the external pressures may be to use new technologies, foreign language teachers' engagement with the Internet can have various intrinsic motives. Teachers are conscious of their dual role as linguists and educators. As language practitioners, teachers may realistically regard foreign language Internet use as a tool in their own personal resourcing. In May 1998 a survey of 15 secondary schools in the Merseyside area targeted language teachers involved in initial teacher training. The returns broadly supported this perspective: comments such as, "it's good for me personally to keep up high-level French", and "I use it for my own purposes", imply that the time-consuming and complex tasks of sifting and sorting through a great range of foreign language material are better suited to confident adults familiar with the language and its contexts. Further, the foreign language teacher is appropriately identified as a linguist and life-long learner, swimming readily and habitually in the undiluted waters of the target language.

In their role as educators, however, teachers will be anxious to assess accurately the pedagogic value of the Internet. The same survey netted cautious responses, with teachers keen to submit Internet use to the test of economic value. "It's a

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costly way to expose learners to authentic texts”, says one respondent, summarising a common perception. In addition to initial outlay, the spiral of increasingly sophisticated software requiring increasingly sophisticated hardware (otherwise known as ‘upgrading’) ensures that the cost is such that it could only be justified on an institution-wide basis. This is particularly true of the World Wide Web, where an increasing number of sites deploying the latest web technologies are simply inaccessible from lower-specification setups. Training and support are also ongoing costs. Existing initiatives at governmental level to equip schools with current Information and Communications Technology (ICT) such as the National Grid for Learning make some impact on the cost consideration (Connecting the Learning Society, 1997), so that inventive and useful foreign language applications can be harnessed to already existing school wide infrastructures.

Another teacher reports that ICT work, including use of the Internet, “doesn’t seem to make a real difference to the children’s language learning”. Serious consideration must be given to the effectiveness of our practices, and currently, a limited amount of data exists to quantify the ‘value-added’ worth of learners’ engagement with Internet language material.

Today’s schoolchildren can hardly learn languages by unmediated immersion in the Internet – any more than they might do so by watching foreign satellite television all day, or working their own way through a series of foreign language videos. There is a crucial need to evaluate the language learning possibilities of the Internet. A valid reason for its use lies in the appeal of the main Internet activities, its resource and contact possibilities: the Web is a medium that learners are likely to use recreationally. Different teachers in the survey expressed this rationale, referring to Internet activity as “a unique motivator”, “really engaging for the learners”, and in one case “a means for the learners to make contact internationally”.

L’INTERNET, C’EST QUOI?

What is meant by ‘Internet material’, or ‘Internet activity’? Internet learning could be as broad a topic as book-based learning. It may be useful, within a language learning context, to categorise the Internet broadly as 1) message 2) material, and 3) instruction.

Message: Email provides the potential for reciprocal links between learners and speakers of their target language. Group communication within specific cultural contexts is also possible through newsgroups (Usenet), as are collaborative projects based on language interchange. Teachers may use email and bulletin boards to share their experiences, and videoconferencing may also be

utilised across the Internet. Considerable effort, of course, is often needed to build and sustain a genuine and productive communicative environment.

Material: The amount of ‘material’ on the Web is both colossal and unstructured. The kinds of material that the language teacher needs first to find, and then sift and put to good use, would encompass any and all documentation, reference and source material relating to the target language countries. The authenticity of this material should lend itself strongly to current teaching methodology, offering valid sources of language rooted in the context of the native speaker. An increasing number of websites are being established by public or cultural authorities in the countries of our most commonly learnt modern foreign languages. The Internet traveller – popularly, the French *internaute*, Spanish *internauta*, or UK/US *surfer* – can use the lists or directories of hypertext links provided by these sites to locate topical and authentic information within categories such as film, current events, health, population and pop songs.

Instruction: Dedicated instructional material on the Internet usually takes the form of electronic versions of paper-based reading or exercise material – which is usually returned to paper via a printer – and electronic material to interact with. What we may call the ‘virtual paper’ material may include dedicated teaching material – explicit courses, exercises, tasks and activities designed for language teaching and learning. In practice, such material rarely offers much that could not be more conveniently obtained in the form of ‘actual paper’ materials, along with standard audio and visual resources.

If the usefulness of web ‘resources’ were to be rated against their convenience or uniqueness in relation to traditional resources, then the real strengths of the web lie on the one hand in foreign language news sources and structured topical information (**material**), and on the other in interactive communication possibilities (**message**) such as email or chat facilities (Internet Relay Chat) with speakers of the foreign language. It is much more convenient to access selections from online versions of foreign news on the web. Such sites come with powerful computer-based sifting and search facilities that elevate them above the ‘virtual paper’ category. Learners may pursue links through related material, charting a course through the data. Equally, no traditional distance methods of communication between learners and native speakers are as direct or textual as email or organised Internet-based methods of reciprocal contact such as newsgroups and bulletin boards.

While accessible and searchable online news and topics are a reality, interactive online software

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(instruction) is still largely potential. In theory language learners could interact with, respond to, and receive feedback from, online software. Software 'online' at present seldom offers anything that normal off-line software (perhaps downloaded from the Internet) cannot provide just as well. However, web pages have for some time had the potential to include interaction in the form of feedback, quizzes, and interactive maps. Courses may be managed and assessed using specialised web authoring tools; communication forums can also be provided in the form of point-and-click web bulletin boards; and it is increasingly practical to embed sound and video components, as well as run multimedia interactions using web browser 'plug-ins' such as Flash or Shockwave. Alternatively, 'virtual classroom' services (such as *Français Actuel*) increasingly integrate the multimedia storage capacity of CD-ROM technology with the topical and updatable characteristics of the Internet in order to structure and support Internet learning.

A key problem with instructional 'material' (in the broad sense) on the web is that what is billed as teaching material frequently turns out to be a reference to teaching material, or a list of further links to the same 'teaching material'. Many hypertext links can seem promising but lead to 'material' (whether authentic resource material, or designed instructional material) that can be variously thin, old-hat, irrelevant, or commercial. Not uncommonly, a long trail of links can end up in a blind alley, with a telephone number, an advert, or yet another list.

AUTHENTICITY AND TOPICALITY

Unarguably, then, the Internet can give access to authentic and up-to-date news reports and (sometimes) structured topic data, from the target language countries. Newspaper and press material, often printed in digestible, clearly presented form with appropriate search references, brings the linguist far closer to the actuality of the country than might any random purchase of a range of daily and weekly newspapers or periodicals. Access to foreign Internet newspapers enables issue-based enquiry and topical research, where the user may pursue a coherent theme (*le procès Papon, los gitanos, new German spelling*) through a great range of national publications. Possibilities for comparison in form and content are enhanced and the diversity of treatment, register and 'house styles' across different publications/sources will be encountered in a real and visual way. Recent emphases on language register, beginning with the National Curriculum for England, point up a need to familiarise young learners with text and style, as part of a process that extends across the whole curriculum. Scope for personal discovery and investigation is enhanced, so that the acquisition of key information – selected, extracted – in the foreign language is within the reach of learners of

different abilities.

Media and press extracts are readily signposted and reached, in contrast to the wider range of source material, on the Internet. For example, Internet directories (or catalogues) such as Yahoo! (including its various European incarnations) provide easy point-and-click hypertext access to a wide range of newspaper digests, without the need to perform a search. Other native 'directories' include *Nomade* in France, *Apali* in Spain, and *web.de* in Germany.

THE INTERNET FOR (SOME) LANGUAGE LEARNING?

It is interesting to try to locate foreign language Internet activities within known patterns of language learning and language acquisition. While no single theory suits everyone, it is reasonably safe to refer to an established method which underpins much language teaching and learning in this country. Such a general method would set out the largely linear process of movement from reception to production of the language, inspired by Hawkins (1987). Later, we have the linked steps of presentation, practice and production (e.g. Cajkler & Addelman, 1993) of new vocabulary and structures. Moreover, such teaching would aim to foster, where possible, the 'intention to mean' (Hawkins, 1987) at the heart of communicative methods, so learners may use, rather than merely learn, language. (The National Curriculum for England endorses this, with an early signalling of "using language for real purposes, as well as to practise skills"). Engaging with Internet language material in a structured setting would fulfil the first recognised stage by introducing learners to old and new language, so they familiarise themselves with form and meaning. Carefully selected material and activities would hopefully promote the intention to mean, and address the 'real purposes' ideal.

The next stage in such a sequence requires learners to work with the new language in guided, prompted contexts, thus, practising and reinforcing new words and forms. Established techniques of gist comprehension, reformulation, text manipulation, translation and re-translation, cloze procedures, rewriting and reordering, applied to the new, topical authentic material, would meet this objective, made easier perhaps by ICT facilities for textual intervention. However, this 'middle stage' of language learning is enhanced by the possibilities of suitable Internet material lending itself to interactive skills such as selecting and ordering data, prioritising, sorting and discarding information, pursuing and developing a line of enquiry (often through hypertext links). All of these functions may be language enhancing, necessarily augmenting previously assimilated vocabulary with newer items, repeating, consolidating and reforming them in a fairly

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independent way.

The final stage, where learners actively use and manipulate their new language in a more autonomous way, might be reflected in the language classroom's usual 'products': a redrafting or presentation of material, a résumé or 'answer' to a question whose answer lay in research through foreign language data, the individualised responses or role-taking engendered by the material would all represent learning outcomes. In addition, there exist the activity and interactivity of the message possibilities of the technology, where a learner might produce their own response, contribution or composition directed to the information, or correspondent, on screen. Gilles Bousquet (1997) describes *la logique* of the Internet: the learners are no longer recipients of material but processors and, ideally, creators. *Access to the Internet must not be confused with learning or teaching*, he asserts, which makes the educational method for its use all the more crucial.

For present-day anglophone language teachers, a chief constraint of the communicative classroom is its artificiality, resulting in the need to elicit responses to imagined 'authentic' situations. The same 'logic' of the Internet's communication possibilities mitigates this, to some extent, by providing more real listeners, or more real sources and purposes for information retrieval.

A specimen plan for educational Internet use follows, based on an examination of a one-stop web site, "France @ la carte". This example could be updated for the 2000 European Football Championships or adapted to a range of other contexts. The scheme of activities does not constitute a lesson plan nor a prescribed set of aims, but rather sets out a suggested approach to *treating* Internet resources, with examples, structuring learning and language use built around a specific topic. Activities make progressive use of both language and technology, requiring the learner to become increasingly autonomous. Work

may be undertaken singly or in groups, and the language of instruction simply reflects the language of the site. The schema does not set out to represent standard practice, and is generic rather than specifically intended for any one group of learners, being but an attempt to dip one's toe in the largely uncharted waters of Internet methods.

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WEB ADDRESSES

France @ la carte <http://www.francealacarte.org.uk/>
Lingu@net <http://www.linguanet.org.uk>

Directories

Yahoo: <http://www.yahoo.co.uk>
 Apali: <http://www.apali.com/>
 Nomade: <http://www.nomade.fr/>
 web.de: <http://www.web.de>

European search engine <http://www.euroseek.com>

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