

An evaluation of the use of the Internet for the purposes of foreign language learning

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Linguists involved in language teaching and thereby active in the promotion of communicative skills can not afford to by-pass the opportunities presented by developments in technology. As a result many linguists are keenly interested in using such developments in technology in the language classroom. While it is true that the approaches, interests and goals of language teachers/learners vary considerably from those of specialists from other disciplines, in a sense, any and all information available on the Internet is of interest to language teachers/learners. The difficulty or challenge which language teachers may face, however, is to adapt discrete methodological and pedagogical strategies to the use of new technologies in order to meet the language learners' requirements. In this sense, and in order to guarantee the maintenance of high academic standards while ensuring language acquisition, language teachers strive to integrate new pedagogical approaches in language classes and to introduce the principles of autonomous and semi-autonomous language learning through the promotion of new technologies in the language classroom.

This article considers such developments and concentrates on the means by which specific goals of language teaching/learning for groups of students from diverse specialisms may be attained. The article focuses on the means by which language acquisition has been ensured by the promotion of contemporary methodologies in language teaching/learning and by the introduction of new technologies in the language classroom. It presents examples of current practice where language acquisition has been promoted via the World Wide Web and e-mail.

INTRODUCTION

As technological developments now affect every area of our daily lives including communication, language specialists, seeking to apply the theoretical findings of research in second language acquisition and inter-cultural communication to the classroom situation, find themselves increasingly looking towards technological tools for support. Today the computer-assisted language laboratory complements the audio language laboratory, and satellite television is available on open access to students in most universities. Mixed results with such facilities have increased awareness that each new technological development requires a new methodological approach on the part of teachers and students, or at least a modification of current practice (King and Vockell 1991; Popham and Hughes 1994). In particular, it is essential to consider the distinctive features any technology has to offer, how these are best exploited, and whether there is evidence of unequivocal pedagogical value for the language learner (Anderson 1988; Brierley and Kemble 1991; Denooz 1995; Garret 1988; Janitza 1984; Jones 1986). The most influential technological advance in recent times is arguably

the Internet, which is changing the way information is made available, business is carried out and even how some people spend their leisure time. Against the background of current thinking on language pedagogy, this article aims to examine the value of the Internet to language learners and to argue for the establishment of a set of criteria with which both teachers and learners might more confidently exploit this development and optimise its pedagogical value.

PRINCIPLES OF CURRENT LANGUAGE-LEARNING METHODOLOGY

One of the key principles underpinning much current pedagogy is the promotion of 'learner autonomy', yet debate continues over an adequate definition of this concept (Esch 1994; Little 1989). Our discussion here is based on the working definition that autonomous learners are those placed in the position to identify what they wish to learn, how and when that learning will take place, and how they will monitor the success of their learning process. Arguably, autonomous learners will prove

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more successful than their less autonomous counterparts, as they can transfer such learning skills and strategies confidently to a wide range of new situations. Autonomous learning is, however, something which most students need to learn explicitly (Conacher and Royall 1996). The environment within which learning takes place will also impact upon, support or restrict, that autonomy, so that within educational establishments, for example, institutional regulations on curriculum and assessment may confine students considerably; in practice, language students are often only as autonomous as their institution or teachers allow them to be.

The success of autonomous learning would also seem to be affected by factors such as learner type and attitude towards the learning process. Research suggests that a learner may be more or less ‘syllabus-bound’, i.e. more or less happy to follow a specific pre- and externally determined learning path (Wilson 1981). Equally, the student may tend towards ‘field dependence’ in preferring a step-by-step approach to learning or be happier just diving in and trying to stay afloat in the language, ‘field independence’ (Wilson 1981; Dickinson 1987). Students have different motivations for learning and different goals which affect their attitude towards, and in turn their success within, the learning process (Alatis and De Marco 1981). Acknowledging the value of learner autonomy and the significance of affective factors requires the adoption of a learning-centred approach which encompasses both how individual students learn now and how we would wish them to learn in future (Hutchinson and Waters 1987). Such a pedagogical framework requires both language teachers and learners to evaluate carefully any new technological development such as the Internet, if it is to make a successful contribution to the learning process (Horsfall and Whitehead 1996).

THE INTERNET AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

As indicated above, the Internet has had a major impact on communication over the past few years, yet it has not been without its critics. Given the absence of controls over what is disseminated to whom, particular criticism has been directed at the quality and value of accessible materials. However, complaints about the trivial nature of much of the information on the Internet are arguably of less concern to linguists than to others, for one could contend that anything written by native speakers for native speakers, regardless of subject matter, is authentic learning material of potential value to students. English is the dominant language of the Internet though the increased use of German, Spanish, French and Japanese, in particular, must be acknowledged. The Internet makes material available in these languages which would never

appear in any textbook, so that the target country and its real language are brought immediately into the learning environment without students leaving their desks. Such developments play a major role in democratising the learning process, giving all students equal access to the target country regardless of their financial or personal situation. In the quest for increased learner autonomy, too, the Internet and in particular the Web, warrant closer attention, for they can be exploited both as a *resource* for language teachers or learners and as a *medium* through which the latter can learn (see also Sangster 1995). For example, students may access material primarily for its content (as a basis for project or essay work), or for its linguistic value (text analysis, concordancing, specialist vocabulary); they may avail of language-learning exercises with built-in on-line help or discuss linguistic and cultural issues with e-mail correspondents in the target country. In using the Internet as a resource, the process is essentially one-way, as a medium it may be two-way. While both processes are equally valid and of considerable benefit to language learners, they may not be equally simple to implement.

If students and teachers are to use the Internet effectively to promote language learning, it can be argued that criteria should be established against which to measure both the potential and actual value of any proposed activity. Such criteria may also provide an appropriate framework within which to measure the possible or desirable levels of learner autonomy, as the case studies outlined below will illustrate. Criteria for any teacher contemplating the integration of the Internet into students’ learning might include:

1. The *access* to the Internet and technical support upon which students and teachers can depend is important. For example, if PCs are not available in the classroom, teachers must identify where and when the students can use them, whether printing facilities are available and at what cost.
2. Before students are introduced to the Internet, teachers need to consider how effective the Internet is to *use*. The reaction time of search engines, lapse time for e-mail response and the ease of downloading foreign characters will all affect decision-making on whether activities should be undertaken within the classroom or in students’ own time.
3. If students are going to use the Internet within the classroom or for assessed projects, teachers need to investigate the *reliability* of its use within their own and partner institutions. E-mails which bounce back to the sender, attachments which cannot be opened or URLs (Uniform Resource Locates; i.e. www address) which are listed as useful but are not regularly up-dated will all affect teachers’ and students’ willingness to use the Internet.
4. Teachers must also gauge the value of the Internet as a *learning stimulus*. If students are

wary of computers or have negative experiences of using the Internet because practical factors were not given sufficient attention, the Internet may become a barrier to, rather than a facilitator of, language learning.

5. The success of integrating the Internet will also be affected by the *learning environment* within which students work. Consideration should be given to whether students will work individually or in groups, with or without linguistic/technical support from a teacher, in the classroom or on a self-access basis.
6. The final criterion must be to judge the desired and actual *learning outcome*, whether students have consciously learned more about the language/culture they are studying. In order to evaluate this, teachers should consider how learning might be monitored, feedback provided and support given to students on enhancing learning.

Access, use and reliability might be termed practical criteria; stimulus, environment and outcome are rather pedagogical criteria. Combining such criteria may prove particularly useful when considering, firstly, the contribution of the Internet as a *resource* or as a *medium* for language learning and, secondly, the desired level of autonomy to be promoted.

Using the Internet as a resource is relatively uncomplicated, because activities remain essentially of an information-gathering nature. Using it as a medium is much more ambitious, as essential issues such as the choice of collaborators, the compatibility of systems, the level of discourse, the type of register, etc. need to be taken into account. The following four case-studies, drawn from experiences at the University of Limerick, serve to illustrate some Internet applications: the first outlines the Internet used as a teacher-driven resource; the second and third as a student-driven resource; and the fourth as a student-driven medium. Brief commentaries following the case descriptions indicate how the established criteria might be exploited to assess the success of such activities in promoting language-learning.

Case 1: teacher-driven resource

During Academic Years 1993-96, French and German staff gathered authentic material from Internet sources. This material was subsequently developed, tested and made available to language students for in-class use and on a self-access basis as a general introduction to the study of contemporary French/German cultures and societies. In collecting material, staff sought to provide students with tailored learning packages which allowed them to improve their reading and presentation skills and to acquire specialised language more relevant to their main-stream studies, principally Engineering and Science and Humanities. Students

were also shown how best to exploit material of particular relevance for their linguistic, professional and/or cultural needs.

Initially, consideration of the practical criteria (access, use and reliability) directed teachers to gather materials themselves and the material-gathering allowed teachers to identify potential problems of using this new tool and possible solutions. Students had limited access to the Internet. The establishment of pedagogical criteria had little immediate impact on the learning process, but in time exposure to the increased use of authentic materials did bring home to students the potential benefits of such Web searches. In those specific situations where the materials were used in conjunction with language-learning software, such as Globalink or Questionmark, and integrated with in-class and self-study activities, the pedagogical criteria became crucial in determining how students might best be encouraged to use the materials to their full. In particular, the value of introducing activities, even those intended to be undertaken primarily on a self-access basis, first within a classroom environment became clear. This approach significantly increased student confidence and willingness to participate in new activities as gleaned from the results of a detailed evaluation of the module and the authentic materials used (see Chambers, Conacher and Royall 1998).

Case 2: student-driven resource

During Academic Years 1994-97, first-year Engineering and Science students of French had to submit end-of-term written and oral reports, using the Web, on an area of the French language, culture and/or society as a preparation for a possible work or study placement in France. During the first few weeks of the academic year, language staff introduced students to the principles of semi-autonomous language learning and guided them through the workings of the CALL laboratory, including the rudiments of Web searching¹. Specific times were set aside in the Computer-aided Language Learning (CALL) laboratory whereby a teacher and a technician were in attendance to help the students in the event of any linguistic/cultural or technical difficulty. Outside of these times students were, of course, at liberty to avail of access to the Internet as they required throughout the week. In presenting their oral and written reports, students were requested to adhere to a number of learning-focused guidelines. These guidelines included: the title and information of the research, the reason for the search, the means by which the information was found (i.e. URLs, search engines, etc.), the problems encountered and the ways these problems were resolved, the information found, the level of satisfaction with the information found, and what the students planned to do with the information.

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