

# Exploiting foreign-language web content for language learning

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Note: This article is adapted from a Masters thesis (Bromley 2007), which can be viewed in full at <http://www.ineedpractice.com/thesis.pdf>

## ***Introduction***

In recent years the web has evolved in such a way that it has become a fantastic resource for anyone wishing to improve or practise a foreign language. Increased access to broadband, a change in the way we use the web in our every day lives for entertainment and communication and the arrival of 'Web 2.0' (a more socially collaborative, user-generated content based version of the web) mean it has become the perfect tool for language learners.

A key aspect in the process of learning a language is repeated exposure to the language in its natural form, in a real-life context. It is common knowledge that living among native speakers helps improve progress in a language because it means constant exposure to the language, all in a real-life context. For anyone who does not have the opportunity to live abroad (or who has perhaps done so previously and now returned), it used to be difficult to gain much exposure to a foreign language.

Less than two decades ago the only methods available to access real spoken French were to tune in to a crackly French station on long wave radio, to try and find a French film showing at the cinema or rent a video. Pen friends were written to by post. All these methods took considerable effort. Today language learners have free access to a seemingly endless supply of spoken and written content in any major world language, at any time of the day on the World Wide Web.

The focus of this article will be on the use of the web for the student engaging in self-study or supplementary study outside the classroom or the teacher in need of opportunities to expose students to authentic materials. The foreign-language web content under investigation will be natural, native-speaker examples of a foreign language, not materials specifically designed to teach a language.

It is recognised that the value of native-speaker web content is greater to those language learners who already have some knowledge of the foreign language. Beginner language learners would be better to gain their grounding in the language by way of teaching materials or a course. Language learners are more likely to benefit from using the

web to practise what they have learnt elsewhere and develop that knowledge. Such practice is, of course, just as important in the process of learning a language as is taking lessons and engaging in active learning.

### ***Useful Web Content***

This section will look at the content and functionality of different web resources in terms of usefulness for a language learner.

#### **Online News Content**

Articles and videos about current affairs mean a learner can use what they already know about news stories to help them understand points that are made in a foreign language. The importance of learners understanding the context or having made some mental predictions about what they are about to read or hear when using foreign language texts is well recognised. Harmer (1991) states that "efficient readers or listeners predict what they are going to hear and read". Being able to draw on existing knowledge of a subject or context helps the learner make assumptions about the meaning of words they have not previously encountered.

**Example 1:** *BBC News Online, 7 September 2007*

[http://news8.thdo.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/international/newsid\\_6982000/6982879.stm](http://news8.thdo.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/international/newsid_6982000/6982879.stm)

This article is on Osama bin Laden – a subject about which most people know something. The article talks about incidents that learners will already understand and so the learners can expect to see certain words. For example, in isolation a learner may not be able to guess the meaning of 'ataques' but, seen in the phrase '*los ataques del 11 de Septiembre*' even the lowest-level learner would be able to guess correctly that it means 'attacks'.

**Example 2:** *ABC Online, 7 June 2007*

<http://videos.abc.es/informaciondecontenido.php?con=1123>

This news video about Paris Hilton leaving jail was worldwide news that most people knew something about when it was produced. It is likely that learners would have already heard the same story in English, or their native language, so when hearing it in Spanish, they can again use their knowledge about this item to help them understand.

#### **Comments and Discussion Forums**

Although the web provides many good opportunities for writing in foreign languages, opportunities for doing this have never been lacking for the learner – anyone can pick up a pen and a piece of paper at any time and start writing. What the web does provide, however, is opportunities for *meaningful* written communication. If the learner is writing a forum post to contribute to an online discussion, or to

comment on a news article, there is the satisfaction of knowing that their writing will be read and considered by others (in particular by native speakers, not just fellow students or a teacher).

**Example:** *El Mundo 'Photo de la Semana'*

<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/lafotodelasemana.html>

This section of the website of El Mundo (a major Spanish newspaper) is named 'Photo of the Week'. It presents, on a weekly basis, a thought-provoking or intriguing photo, gives some observations on it and invites users to add their comments. This is very similar to the type of activity used in language classrooms where students are given a starting point for spoken discussion or written work, as described in Harmer (1991; Chapter 8). By contributing to a site such as this, learners can put themselves on a level with other native speakers who are commenting.

### Online Videos

Learning in a classroom environment or from a book is one thing, but when students find themselves among people using the language in natural conversation, they often struggle to understand and feel overwhelmed or out of their depth. Online videos, such as those available on YouTube, show real speakers in a natural environment engaging in real social situations. The advantage here is that you can watch again and again without having to ask a person to repeat. To make the task of understanding even less daunting for learners, it would be useful, when using such videos, to pre-teach key vocabulary that is likely to be unknown - a recognised technique in language teaching (Richards *et al* 1992).

**Example:** Saudi Girls Fans

<http://es.youtube.com/watch?v=y7SlzBhTmug&mode=related&search=>

This video shows Arabic speakers in a natural environment. The background noise and the emotion in the speakers' voices make the clip an authentic representation of the conditions under which a learner may find themselves when using the new language with native-speakers in a foreign country. As mentioned previously, learners can also draw on visual clues about the context (i.e. the girls have just watched a football match) to help further their understanding of what is being said. General knowledge about the types of things people usually say after football matches will help learners fill in some of the gaps in their understanding.

### Special note about YouTube

In June 2007, YouTube launched several localised international sites which provide a country-specific experience for the user. Part of this involves a local search function, which would be of benefit to a language learner wanting to find videos in a particular language.

There are also plans to localise other areas of the site (country-specific video rankings and comments, as well as Video, Channel, Categories and Community sections). Furthermore, YouTube has signed up various international content partners, including broadcasters such as the BBC, France 24, the Spanish Antena 3 and Cuatro TV, the Portuguese RTP, the Dutch VPRO and NPO. This is also of interest for language learners because it means high-quality foreign-language videos will be easily found via YouTube<sup>1</sup>. (NB: Many local authorities block YouTube so this is definitely a resource for the individual learner at home).

### Online TV

To some the difference between online video and online TV may be unclear. The main difference is that online TV provides generally longer-length, professionally produced TV programmes, viewed over especially downloaded software. Online video usually consists of shorter clips, sometimes produced by amateurs, viewed in a web browser.

### Examples:

Providers of online TV include Joost and Babelgum, but there are also many others. At the moment, the content that is available from these providers is somewhat limited, especially from the point of view of the language learner. The majority of content appears to be in English and some restrictions are placed on viewing foreign content from a different territory. However, Babelgum have plans for increasing their non-English content in the future:

As our name suggests, there is going to be space for as many languages as possible. Not immediately, though. Only after the platform is properly established on a bulk of English speaking viewers. Timing for introduction of other languages: first semester 2008. We don't rule out offering language course programming. (Email communication, 15 June 2007)

Online TV in a foreign language can be useful for a learner because it provides free access to programmes in the new language which can be selected to meet the learner's interests and watched again and again. It is also possible to download materials via websites such as <http://www.zamzar.com> and <http://vixy.net> for viewing (e.g. in schools) later.

### Podcasts

There are a lot of language teaching podcasts in existence, such as Radio Lingua's Coffee Break Spanish. There are also many that are recorded for native speakers which can provide more authentic opportunities for practice. In the language classroom, listening

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<sup>1</sup> *YouTube Speaks Your Language* (June 2007) Press Release

[http://uk.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=sbopYZ18uVQ](http://uk.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=sbopYZ18uVQ) (Accessed 21.06.07)

activities involving a recorded text are commonplace. Podcasts provide the opportunity for such listening in the learner's own time in any situation. A great advantage is that learners can choose podcasts on a topic that interests them, and this is likely to increase their motivation to listen. Podcasts are often released on a weekly basis and if the learner subscribes to the podcast via iTunes, the latest podcast is downloaded automatically. This gives a structure to the listening practice and reminds them to listen every week, at very little effort.

**Example:** Palomitas Podcast

<http://www.palomitasconsal.com>

This is a weekly podcast by two Mexican film fans. The podcast discusses the latest movie releases and, occasionally, old favourites. The foreign language listener can benefit because they are likely to know something about the films being discussed and this prior knowledge aids understanding. Due to the differing themes of the films discussed, a variety of situations are talked about so a variety of vocabulary is heard from week to week. Listeners can take something away from the podcast too (in terms of new knowledge about films they may like to watch) and this extra goal to the listening makes it seem more productive and worthwhile.

### **Online radio**

Online radio is an ideal way for the learner to immerse themselves in the language while going about other activities. The radio can be on in the background and the learner does not have to engage in active listening the whole time. They can listen in if they hear something they understand or find interesting. Alternatively, they may listen actively for a short period of time.

This method is useful for general comprehension, learning new vocabulary, developing good pronunciation and intonation. It could also help the learner to develop an intuitive understanding of what sounds right and what sounds wrong (particularly for grammar and stress or intonation).

**Examples:** BBC World Service Online

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/languages/index.shtml>

The BBC World Service broadcasts online in 32 languages. Topics covered often focus on news relevant to the regions where the language is spoken. The BBC's foreign language news websites also contain radio-style audio clips, which are similar to podcasts.

In addition, the website <http://wwiTV.com/portal.htm> provides live streaming of numerous foreign TV stations from various countries, and these could be used in the same way as online radio.

### **MP3s and Music Streaming**

File sharing software (such as Limewire and Bittorrent), music streaming sites (such as Radio Blog Club and Last FM) and MP3 purchase sites (such as Napster and iTunes) give learners access to music in foreign languages that several years ago would have been much more difficult and costly to acquire. Learners can listen to music in a foreign language for enjoyment and try to understand the words, they can then search for lyrics online to check their understanding. In many non-English speaking countries, TV shows and popular music are mainly in English and this helps learners of English in these countries to become familiar with all aspects of English from pronunciation and intonation to grammar and idioms. Any opportunity for the foreign language learner to be able to recreate this type of opportunity is useful.

However, it must be pointed out that depending on how music is accessed online there may be legal implications. Songs available on-demand from sites such as Radio Blog Club or YouTube often exist there illegally. Lyrics published online also usually exist illegally. Sites such as Last FM or Pandora stream music legally but offer less opportunity to select and re-listen to specific songs.

### **Live Chat and VOIP**

For learners who want to practise conversation but lack confidence or a good level, online chat is an ideal way of doing so. It is arguably the perfect combination of the need to think 'on the spot' and respond quickly, while still having some time to look up a word or prepare a sentence in advance. Also key is that the embarrassment factor is very low. Many language learners say they feel shy about speaking in a foreign language and it has long been recognised that this may prevent a person from engaging in as much practice as is necessary:

[Inhibition] may be one of the key obstacles to any learning which necessitates communication or interaction with another person.  
(Brown, 1974)

Similarly, Dickinson (1978:21) concludes:

Arising from this is the hypothesis that the reduction, in the learning situation, of such factors as threat to the learner's ego, inhibition and so on, may facilitate the learning of language.

According to Joinson (1998) people feel less shy or inhibited talking in an online chat environment so this provides just the type of learning situation idealised by Dickinson.

The advantages of online chat do not stop there. A message log of all conversations can be stored automatically. This can be useful to refer to for a reminder of new words which were learnt. Chatting online is safer, more convenient and less awkward or embarrassing than meeting an unknown native speaker in person. Conversation does not

have to flow; there can be pauses for thinking which may feel uncomfortable in spoken conversation. Relationships can easily develop in an online chat environment (Joinson 1998) and this could increase the motivation to communicate.

There are of course some disadvantages to this method. For languages that do not use a Roman script (e.g. Mandarin, Arabic), it may be more difficult to communicate – although Roman script can be used to transliterate and this technique is used commonly on the internet. Also, the method provides no practice for pronunciation and native speakers may be tempted to use abbreviated ‘text speak’ that may confuse the learner.

A VOIP (voice over IP) provider, such as Skype, allows people in any location around the globe to make voice phone calls for free. Such technology provides access to native speakers, as with messenger chat, but also allows for spoken practice which can be useful for improving pronunciation. While speaking, the learners can simultaneously communicate via a chat screen to illustrate spellings or other writing. A disadvantage of using voice calls for practice could be that unless there is a structure to what is being talked about or taught, conversation could be difficult or stilted, especially with speakers of a low level. There is a pressure to keep the conversation going and the embarrassment factor is likely to be higher because the mistakes can be heard.

### **Examples:**

To find a native speaking partner with whom to converse online, a learner could reply to an advert on a site such as:

[http://www.gumtree.com/london/london-skills-language-swap\\_1583\\_1.html](http://www.gumtree.com/london/london-skills-language-swap_1583_1.html)

The ‘Language Swap’ section of this site is well-used by people looking for speaking partners. There are several other sites which aim to pair up learners and native speakers for an online language exchange, however some charge for the service, such as *My Language Exchange* (<http://www.mylanguageexchange.com>).

### ***In Conclusion***

It is therefore possible that by optimising the language-learning opportunities available on the web, learners can take a more autonomous, naturalistic approach to language learning that involves self-study with authentic materials. Benson (2001) states that:

As the theory and practice of language teaching enters a new century, the importance of helping students become more autonomous in their learning has become one of its more prominent themes. (Benson 2001:64)

Based on what has been found in this study, it is hoped that the web and the internet can play a significant role in developing this theme.

The web, specifically its social and collaborative characteristics, could be highly effective in overcoming the key disadvantage of self-directed learning that is identified below:

Research from the field of language learning suggests that self-instruction is not an effective method of learning a language by itself. Perhaps this is because entirely self-instructed learners lack opportunities for collaboration and communication that are essential to second language acquisition. (ibid)

Access to the internet can provide learners with authentic foreign-language materials *and* fellow learners or native speakers with whom they can collaborate and communicate. This indicates how powerful a tool the web can be for language learning and it is predicted that its worth will only continue to grow further as the web develops.

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