# Introducing the Web: The language teacher, the maze, and the wise guide
# Review Article of Uschi Felix: Virtual language learning: finding the gems among the pebbles, Melbourne, Language Australia, 1998. pp. 182 + CD-ROM.

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By any standards, the Web is a daunting phenomenon: well more than 50 million pages, supplemented by hyperlinks to other pages and documents, and other texts, in the brave new sense of machine-readable files of written words, graphics, audio or video. On top of this is the diversification by language, with thousands now represented on the Web.

Little wonder that many language teachers are overwhelmed by this avalanche; equally little wonder that language learners, unguided and unsure where to turn for material that is within their grasp and worth their effort, turn back from the grail in search of more digestible pastures, and in some cases leave the pasture and take up something else.

This is the gap that Uschi Felix has set out to remedy. Virtual language learning (henceforth "VLL") is not a complete vade mecum for language learners on the Web. Indeed, I am not sure what such a book might look like, or whether it could be written at all. The constituency is now too diversified, the material on the Web too amorphous and huge, and the fit between these factors and language learning goals and methods too multi-dimensional.

Felix sensibly avoids attempting the impossible. Instead, she focuses on the knowledge levels typically found in language teachers. What do they know, and what do they need to know, about computer hardware and software; about the physical and logical structure of the Web, and the software that drives and maintains it; about multimedia "texts", and how they are moved around the Web and consumed by individuals at the nodes of the Web; about applications and their delivery? There are other introductions to the Web for a general audience, but I do not know of another book that positions itself specifically to facilitate access to the Web by practising language teachers.

This is not a step-by-step book for Internet initiates. It is rather a critical mental map of those parts of the Web that r of CALL software or a multimedia configuration tailored to the needs of the teacher-designer and of potential value to any like-minded colleague.

Although constant improvements in processing speed have meant that the rate of delivery of information from freestanding systems now rarely creates time lags that detract from the educational merit of courseware, the same is not yet true of Web-based activities. The cynicism that causes users to refer to WWW as the World Wide Wait is not entirely wpe to derive from what they find.

VLL is organized as four Parts and four Appendices.

Part 1 (Introduction) presents an initial map of the issues which the Web involves, seen from the working teacher, together with advantages and limitations: distribution and

access, richness and volatility, navigation, mono- and multi-media, interactivity and the controlling role of technology rather than pedagogy, exploratory and experiential learning.

Part 2 is the courseware core of VLL. It provides an extended description of a selected range of Web sites for language learning, organized by example sites, which amount to exemplar sites, divided first by content and then by language. "Content" in this context means: integrated materials for whole-subject instruction freely available; substantial materials; substantial materials which are not freely available; activities based on textbooks or magazines; grammar, pronunciation and dialogue exercises; interactive grammar and vocabulary exercises; sites in the target language with interactive feedback; MOOs, MUDs and MUSHes; self-contained interactive tasks; structured teaching plans for interactive tasks; and Chat sites. This arrangement is original and effective. Felix has found an eminently useful way to cut across the confusion, and to provide a characterization which both provides the teacher with the information required, and determines a number of the properties which genuinely distinguish different kinds of sites, different kinds of material, different methodologies and different modes of learning and teaching.

Part 3 deals with technology: the nuts and bolts of the Web as a physical system of bytes, wires and computers. At first glance it looks as if it is for the technologically timorous. In fact it covers a surprising amount of basic- and intermediate-level technical detail, well explained and annotated. It would be agreeable if teachers could regard the technology essentially as a black box, with interfacing software to allow them to concentrate on language teaching and learning. But experience with CALL has confirmed what was learnt, often painfully, from the language laboratory: it is necessary to get at least some way inside the technology in order to exploit it effectively for teaching.

Part 4 deals with character sets: extended Roman, right-to-left systems like Arabic and Hebrew, and character-based languages. In most introductions to the Web these topics are relegated to an obscure appendix. In VLL they have an appropriately prominent position, with proper references to the International Standards Organization's specifications. Teachers need this kind of guidance, and it is well handled. Felix includes a short account of Unicode as an integrated approach which may well provide a simpler mechanism for handling multiple character sets in Web-based language learning.

The Appendices include a short list of ESL/EFL/TESOL sites, lists of selected sites for languages in general and some sites for specific languages, and a list of readings on MUDs and MOOs from EUROCALL 98.

Felix is very good when it comes to explaining technology to practising teachers (Parts 3-4), and especially in characterizing the kinds of information available from different language learning and language-related sites on the Web. She properly emphasizes transparency and the need for screen design and material presentation to lead quickly and sensibly to the learning tasks, and VLL is generously provided with screen dumps of home pages and interactive screens from many of the sites discussed. The balance and interaction of text, audio and video is eminently clear. The construction, design and rationale of several sites are developed in more detail, as with the extended description of the task-based approach of the Long March Chinese language site at the University of South Australia (pp. 75-90). Teachers approaching Web-enhanced CALL need to be able to see the software from the inside, and this breakdown of learning goals and strategies to handle them provides an insightful bridge to the kinds of issues which apply to non-IT language teaching. They also need to know that the software has been

competently designed and delivered. Most Web texts are authentic in the sense of being the real language in a real environment, although their usefulness, truthfulness, and competence are anything but assured by their occurring on the Web (Sussex 1998b). Felix provides the equivalent of an editorial filter as well as critical evaluation for language pedagogy. The material indexed and discussed in VLL meets professional standards, something which is not provided by the Web itself.

Attacking a subject like a language learning and the Internet in a single book is a vast task, and it would be churlish of the reader to be too demanding over inclusions and exclusions. Felix manages to avoid much of the brouhaha between Microsoft Explorer and Netscape Communicator, which is sound policy, and her eclectic balance is generally well-judged. However, while the emphasis on Windows at the expense of other platforms like Macintosh is justified in terms of market share, it is nonetheless limiting, especially in the language teaching area, where Apple has one of its larger bases. I confess to being malic (Latin malum 'apple'); I deny being anti-fenestral. But one of the things that is not clearly explained in VLL is the difference between Macintosh/Windows applications on the one hand, and platform-independent software, written in a language like Java, which runs transparently on either of these platforms or on UNIX machines.

A wider issue concerns frameworks for structuring the evaluation of Internet sites, software, and pedagogy. One line of approach is to import criteria and yardsticks from non-IT language pedagogy. Here we have direct access to well tested (though not always uncontroversial) criteria on curriculum, resourcing, materials, pedagogy, evaluation and assessment, and methodology. But these transplants do not always work well, nor do they allow automatic mapping from the non-IT to the IT domain. And while there are some criteria for classifying and evaluating Web-based materials, we are still lacking both taxonomy and an evaluation metric for Web-based learning. I suspect that we need to go back to earlier approaches to evaluating CALL courseware and software (e.g. Levy and Faruggia 1988).

Felix tackles a number of these features in her review of different software packages, and one of the beneficial side-products of VLL is how it sharpens the focus on these matters. They are not a major focus of the book, nor should we expect them to be. But it is not possible to proceed much further without a clearer understanding of the knowledge structures and pedagogical evaluation of IT-based learning. Levy and Farrugia tackled this problem in 1988. While this treatment is now starting to date and needs revision, theirs is one of the more promising steps towards a serious attempt at solving this problem. If we do not address it, our ability to tackle the characterization and evaluation of IT-based learning will remain unformalized and to some extent incomplete and anecdotal.

Nowhere is this so evident as with interactivity. The pre-Web CALL models of interactivity had the learner providing input to a software package and receiving feedback, more or less within the "tools, tutor, and tutee" framework (Taylor 1980). By the early 1980s, the expectations of CALL teachers and learners were becoming more sophisticated and more demanding, in an attempt to parallel the interactive patterns of language learning in a communicatively-based classroom. These requirements for more "intelligent" materials were increasingly beyond the reach of CALL producers. Programming such materials, whether in multimedia or intelligent CALL, is a major undertaking, requiring expensive skills, extensive time, and skills of conceptualization and implementation which go beyond those of most competent practising CALL teachers (Levy 1997).

Beyond the level of string matching and comparison, it requires techniques that belong more to Artificial Intelligence than to language pedagogy. This places a barrier in the path of the evolution of CALL, partly in terms of cost in courseware development, and partly in terms of the expertise needed to engineer such interactivity.

The Web has provided a social dimension which, as I have argued (Sussex 1998a), may have saved CALL from this bottleneck by opening up interactive parameters that we did not have available before. Multimedia have enriched the range and authenticity of input, but they have not increased the quality of interactivity. But much of the multimedia material on the Web is not particularly complex in terms of logical structure or interactivity. Where we do find enhanced interactivity is in user-to-user interactions through email and Internet Relay Chat. But there is no guarantee of the quality of the feedback which listeners receive. It may be competent and considered. But it is equally likely that it will be from a co-user of the Web who is not expert in the language or domain, and who does not have a professional language teacher's understanding of the needs of an individual learner, or indeed of the characteristics, learning state and goals of the person at the other end of the link.

This dilemma of interactivity remains acute. Until we develop a theoretically sound and empirically valid framework for interactivity, we will not be in a position to understand precisely how the Web contributes to neutralizing the effects of distance, and to contributing to interactive learning in virtual space. Felix is certainly not obliged to develop such a framework for VLL. But the absence of such a framework in the literature means that our conceptualization of Web interactivity in learning is subject to a glass ceiling.

The other cavil with VLL, inevitably, has to do with sites included or omitted. There are now thousands of sites available for language learning, exploration, and development. But some meta-sites list resources available for various language domains Appendix B). In the absence of any authoritative structure, organ, institution or mechanism for identifying these key locations, the users have to do it themselves - rather like trying to regulate the English language, as a bottom-up, consensual process. Some of the key sites for language pedagogy and related matters are those which belong to professional associations. In one of my stamping grounds, Slavic languages, there is the site of the American Association for the Teaching of Slavic and c AATSEEL, which can be found at http://www.kathleen.slavic.pitt.edu/~aatseel/index.html.

Their site contains a wide range of information on materials, sources and resources, fonts, expertise, publications, and related matters. Users familiar with search techniques should be able to find their way to the AATSEEL site, but it takes experience, intuition born of practice, and some luck. This is one of the sites which Felix doesn't list. It is useful to know the kinds of meta-sites that are around, and which often offer more than local help for language learning. These include higher-level meta-sites, like the Linguist site http://www.linguistlist.org and the site of the Summer Institute of Linguistics: http://www.sil.org.

Felix's coverage is eclectic and international, with sites and subjects from around the globe. So also with the languages, though there is some bias towards European languages on account of their earlier start. Asian languages are well represented on Australian sites, as is appropriate given the resources and policy profiles which have favoured Asian languages so strongly over the past decade. TESOL is there too, though

in a deliberately lower key; interested users will have no difficulty in finding an over-supply of material if they need it.

There are several respects in which VLL could have done even better. It has no index, which limits its usefulness as a reference tool. The table of contents is detailed, but linear, and it is not easy to recapture material which one has read and lost, even in a book of these moderate dimensions — or to see if the book covers this or that issue that you want to follow up. VLL was not designed for the reference function, a fact which is also underlined by the absence of a glossary. The Web itself can provide the answers, after some searching and sifting, but it would have been much more compact to have a list of key terms, and especially explanations of acronyms, which are one of the less transparent outcomes of the Web.

Books about the Web, even meta-studies like Turkle's Life on the screen, tend to date with devastating speed. The Web itself is growing and changing, and as a result the only way to keep track is through the Web itself. (And even here the number of out-dated sites with pages no longer available is becoming a real barrier to the operation of the various indexing engines like Alta Vista and Yahoo). Felix proposes to keep VLL current by updating the CD-ROM. This is surely not the best choice. While it keeps control of the text with the author, it is a relatively cumbersome mechanism. Why not use the Web itself? The message of VLL is that moving bytes is cheaper and faster and more convenient than moving books and other physical objects. There is no great difficulty in mounting the updates on the Web and protecting them by password mechanisms, and this preserves the integrity of the original text — which will unavoidably require major revision within 3 years, and perhaps even major rewriting, as the Web blunders forward with increasing speed and volume.

This is a cheerfully Australian book, with a certain bias towards locally produced materials and initiatives. That's fine. We have had more than enough guides to the Web which have a statutory Eurocentric or America-centric view. Some readers may feel uncomfortable with strong Monash emphasis. VLL is avowedly an account of how the Monash Language Centre has developed its IT coverage over the last few years, and this experience may well be useful for other language laboratories. And if not, then VLL should help provide language laboratory directors and users with guidance on how to select from the options available, and how to adapt these to their current and developing needs.

There is no doubt that there is a need for a book of this kind. It is more surprising that it wasn't written earlier — which is in itself an affidavit for VLL. Before VLL we tended to have bipartite literature, falling on one side or other of the nexus between L2 pedagogy and computer-based learning. Felix, standing squarely in the middle with a firm grip on both ends of this nexus (to stretch a metaphor and reify a nexus), offers a clear view of what language teachers need to know about the CALL-Web dimension. This book doesn't answer all the questions, but it certainly makes the view substantially clearer than it was. It is a most workmanlike, professional, and eminently useful contribution. And it successfully conveys the idea that using the Web for language learning is varied, motivating, and fun.

There is a special pleasure in having the last word. I have a closure which I hope will leave me, at least this time, with the ultimum verbum to the satisfaction of all. Virgil once wrote:

- Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
- "Happy is the person who has been able to understand the causes of things"
- I have another construal:
- "Felix, who has been able to understand the causes of things"