

Accessible Authenticity: Internet Resources for Foreign Language Learners Having Difficulty

David R. Wilson

Equal Opportunities Department
Harton School, South Shields, UK

Foreign Language Learners and Special Needs

"Teachers who reflect on their own learning experiences within the educational system may remember instances when they also had special needs."

Broadly speaking, learners have special needs if there is a mismatch between what they bring to an institution or curriculum and what the institution or curriculum demands of them. Social, economic, medical or psychological conditions may have a deleterious effect on an individual's performance. Special educators, however, need to consider first the possibility that institutional or curricular factors are contributing to learning difficulties.

Teachers who reflect on their own learning experiences within the educational system may remember instances when they also had special needs. During my English Language Assistantship in a French lycée in the late 1960s, I opted for an advanced French course for foreign students at the local university. I was keen to improve my listening skills and was excited at the prospect of using a language laboratory for the first time. I still wince, however, when I recall the supervisor's 'Vous êtes britannique, n'est-ce pas?' as I subsequently wrestled in my language laboratory booth with pattern drills requiring thirty-word sentences to be heard and reproduced from memory in the imperfect tense. Later, as a young teacher of MFL in an English school with a language laboratory, I resolved to spare my charges these Herculean ordeals and to set them more appropriate tasks.

A more conventional and manageable definition of special needs at school level is to place within that category children who have significantly greater difficulty in learning than most of their peers of the same age. A Reading Age of 9 is the minimum requirement for coping with the literacy demands of a mainstream secondary school placement at Chronological Age 11. A quarter of my school's intake

starts with Reading Ages two or more years below Chronological Ages. Although a tiny minority of these learners subsequently transfer to local special schools, most will remain in mainstream education receiving their full subject entitlement, including one modern foreign language (MFL).

Special Needs Electronic Resource Projects

The UK's National Curriculum Council highlighted "a difference in approach between ordinary and special schools (and) between MFL specialists and specialist teachers of pupils with SEN. The first group begins from the demands of the subject, the second from the individual needs of the particular pupil. Successful language learning for all pupils with SEN requires skillful and sensitive combination of these" (Department for Education and Welsh Office: 3).

My point of departure in two previous Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) projects was indeed an electronic resource, which I wished to submit to classroom trialling. In both cases, the research focus shifted towards the individual needs of the learner exploiting the resource (Wilson 1996). When I trialled the British Tourist Authority's German viewdatabase *Großbritannien Urlaub* as a classroom resource, I collaborated with a boy exhibiting challenging behavior. He was interested in computers and eager to find a teacher willing to supervise him when he used them after school. We were able to negotiate an agenda that benefited us both.

In a second project, I downloaded several pages from the Swiss city of Lausanne's viewdatabase. I then used them to introduce the French topic of travel to two small groups of 13-year-olds with learning difficulties. The topic was subsequently developed through multimedia software and a classic computer language game. The latter had two playing levels to cater for the wide ability range that existed in both classes, despite the over-representation of SEN registrees. Both groups later completed, under examination conditions, a writing task closely resembling the language game but incorporating elements from the other software. Fourteen of the sixteen candidates could frame at least one competent target-language response. All learners expressed themselves satisfied with the test's fairness and acknowledged the significant contribution of IT usage to their preparation.

The Internet Francophone Project

National public viewdata has a few advantages over the World Wide Web as a source of MFL materials for Anglophone learners, for example:

- It specializes in short texts, often abbreviated further with graphics, its 24-row and 40-column display averaging 500 characters, while a book or Web page may contain eight times as many.
- Its national language is typically its sole medium, French for *Télétext*, German for *Bildschirmtext* and Spanish for *Ibertext*, while English is hard to avoid on the Web.

These and other pluses derive from the constraints of viewdata, which also have serious disadvantages, for example:

- Direct dialing at international telephone rates imposes a heavy burden on cash-strapped schools.
- Special software is required to screen viewdata pages and at least three different European standards of display are in operation.
- Viewdata pages are primarily intended for screen display and often require extensive recoloring to be readable on paper.
- Guest access, widely available in the early 1990s, has become the exception rather than the rule.

"The fact remains--at least as far as the United Kingdom is concerned--that the Internet has made few inroads into schools..."

According to 'German as a foreign language specialists' Stoye and Pirkkalainen, 'Arbeiten im Internet - es gibt nichts authentischeres.' The Internet offers access to the publications not only of governments, organizations and companies but also of individuals. Internet providers vie for the custom of the growing number of families with home PCs while public libraries ensure that those without computers can experience the Internet at little or no cost. In short, the Internet is everywhere, it is impossible to ignore it and it is expanding all the time.

The fact remains--at least as far as the United Kingdom is concerned--that the Internet has made few inroads into schools, let alone MFL classrooms. Even computer-literate secondary school MFL teachers are prone to regard on-line media as a library resource for advanced learners and therefore irrelevant to beginners or learners with special needs. For them, the Internet is a solution in search of a problem.

The on-line media initiative that I have dubbed the *Internet Francophone Project* began with a very concrete curricular problem to which the Internet offered a partial solution. In September 1996 I found myself once again teaching two groups of 13-year-old learners of French with

"In my experience, learners with special needs in mainstream schools are very reluctant to follow a curriculum that they perceive as having little 'surrender value.'"

special needs. By this stage my school's MFL department had agreed on a topic-based, textbook-independent and National Curriculum-compatible scheme of work to be followed by all teachers within a given year group. The topics of *School Life, Daily Routine, Travel & Transport, Geographical Surroundings, Weather, Health, Arranging a Meeting* and *Holidays* were prescribed for 13-year-old learners of French. These students were invited to tick a 'can-do' list of skills at the end of each unit. As contributor to this scheme of work, I was fully committed to a common-objective approach. In my experience, learners with special needs in mainstream schools are very reluctant to follow a curriculum that they perceive as having little 'surrender value.' At the same time, what they study also needs to be accessible, authentic and appropriate.

I resolved to write most of my own learning materials for the slow learners in my charge. Fortunately, my school's MFL department has a tradition of sharing teacher-produced resources, which reduced the workload. However, what emerged was a dearth of accessible, authentic and appropriate resources for learners with special needs. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was also due to inspect my school over a 5-day period. My response was to access the Internet in search of cross-ability, curriculum-compatible authentic texts.

Using AltaVista and other general search engines, I was able to locate an average of two documents for each scheme of work topic. Tasks were devised to accompany these texts. The National Curriculum decrees that MFL assessment should be conducted entirely in the target language: a tall order for low attainers. The prospect of writing target-language rubrics to accompany the tasks was daunting and I resolved to set exercises with the first question already answered as an example. This strategy of dispensing with rubrics altogether and making the task self-explanatory was endorsed by a speaker at a national Modern Languages and Special Educational Needs conference in July 1996 (Elston).

The National Curriculum for England and Wales lays down eight achievement levels within the MFL Attainment Targets Listening & Responding, Speaking, Reading & Responding and Writing. The first, second and third National Curriculum Levels are pitched at 11- to 12-year-olds in their first year of MFL or older students experiencing learning difficulties. Here is a summary of what is expected at these levels:

Level 1: Students show understanding of single words, simple classroom commands, short statements and questions. They copy single familiar words correctly and respond briefly, with single words or short phrases, to what they see and hear. Their pronunciation may be approximate and they may require considerable support.

Level 2: Students show understanding of short phrases and a range of familiar statements and questions. They copy familiar short phrases correctly and give short, simple responses to what they see and hear. They may need items to be repeated and use books or glossaries to find out the meaning of new words. Their spelling and pronunciation may be approximate when they reproduce familiar words from memory.

Level 3: Students show understanding of short passages, including instructions, messages and dialogues, made up of familiar language, spoken at near normal speed but without interference, printed in books or word-processed. They identify and note main points, such as likes, dislikes and feelings, and are beginning to read independently, using a bilingual dictionary or glossary to look up new words. They use short phrases from memory to express personal responses and occasionally substitute items of vocabulary to vary questions and statements.

Resource and Learning Outcomes

Four Internet resources and their accompanying tasks exemplify the resource and learning outcomes of the *Internet Francophone Project*:

- *Journal d'Héloïse* at http://www.nat.fr/roca/heloise_doc.htm: In this short biography a 7-year-old girl introduces herself, her parents and pets. This text tied in well with the topic of Daily Routine and provided a template for learners to create a similar presentation about themselves and their families, which could earn them a National Curriculum Level 3 score in Writing. The biography was even accessible to beginners, who could all adapt the first two sentences with age and name references from a very early stage. Some could work out what the majority of the text was about and appreciated the authenticity of her liking for the *Lion King* and her amusing choice of pet fish names.
- The Ministry of Education of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg publishes a text-based *calendrier des vacances et congés scolaires* (*Vacances scolaires* for short) at http://www.men.lu/_publications/legislation/vacances95.html applicable to all school years up to the millennium. A Luxembourg school Web site tabulates the 95/96 and 96/97.

"An opportunity also arose to discuss the place of the French language in countries other than France."

- *Congés* at <http://www.restena.lu/lfb/conges.html>. Both texts contributed to the topics of School Life and Holidays. Although the *Vacances Scolaires* text is long, it is also highly repetitive in the way it lists the nine recesses of the school year. The *Congés* page presents similar but outdated information in tabular form. The first column shows the recess dates in numeric format (e.g., 29.10.95 - 05.11.95). The second column names the recess (e.g., *Toussaint*). I asked my learners to update the 95/96 and 96-97 tables in the *Congés* page to the current and following school year. This they were able to do with a little assistance (the first row was done for them). Such a Reading & Responding task was accessible to students at National Curriculum Level 3 or lower.
- *Se déplacer à Paris* at <http://www.parisnet.com/french/city/transport.htm> is a menu of 13 clickable hypertext buttons, each naming a mode of transport in Paris (e.g., *Taxis, Bateaux, Vélos*). The text integrated with the topic of Travel and Transport. The task devised to accompany this text was a series of 12 pictures of forms of transport that the learners had to match with the options in the *Se déplacer à Paris* text. The fact that one of the options on the Web page was a balloon ride added to the authenticity and interest of this very simple text. As this exercise required no more than National Curriculum Levels 1 or 2, my learners with special needs coped well. One 13-year-old boy with a Reading Age of 8 years 9 months had a perfect score.
- *Météo nationale* at <http://www.cmc.ec.gc.ca/cmc/images/Media/Cansysf.gif> is a daily-updated weather map of Canada with symbols and legend. These maps came within the gambit of the topics of Weather and Holidays. I asked my learners to write French phrases, e.g., *Il neige à Whitehorse*, to describe the weather in eight Canadian cities. Most were able to perform this task, some from memory, others by copying from a vocabulary information sheet, showing Writing skills at National Curriculum Levels 2 and 3. The choice of a Canadian weather map as a text reinforced what the learners had studied in Geography lessons. An opportunity also arose to discuss the place of the French language in countries other than France.

Conclusion

If they are properly handled, on-line-media-sourced authentic resources can furnish a suitable basis for the development of the reading skills, vocabulary knowledge and cultural awareness of even low achievers. I wish to emphasize a few points:

- **Accessibility, Authenticity, Appropriateness:** Accessibility means convenience for teachers and intelligibility for learners. Authenticity lies not only in a text's mother-tongue purpose but also in its foreign-language purpose when used by teachers and learners. Appropriateness not only means curriculum compatibility but also a sense of ownership by teachers and learners.
- **Solve curricular problems with electronic resources:** Internet-sourced texts fill gaps in the textbook and the teacher's knowledge and experience. They also add a measure of topicality.
- **Address the needs beyond learners' wants:** Given the chance, many learners with special needs would occupy their time drawing and labeling pictures, with the emphasis on the former. Such learners need to be challenged if they are to make any progress at all beyond National Curriculum Level 1.
- **Work smart with Internet resources:** Downloaded pages can be easily integrated into word-processed documents such as worksheets. Some may still require recoloring because they are designed for screen display.
- **Teamwork:** Web searches for accessible, authentic and appropriate resources to meet learners' special needs is labor-intensive, time-consuming, but ultimately highly rewarding. Teaching colleagues will appreciate your efforts if you share the fruits of your toil with them. Who knows - they may even return the favor! ♦

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the support of the Department for Education and Employment Modern Foreign Languages and Information Technology Project and in particular Terry Atkinson of the University of Bristol School of Education. I also wish to thank my brother Dr Tom Wilson, an independent medical informatics consultant in Minneapolis, for his valuable comments, advice and encouragement.

Works Cited

- Arnold, E. (1991) *Authenticity revisited: How real is real? English for Specific Purposes*, 10, 237-244.
- Breen, M. P. (1985) *Authenticity in the language classroom. Applied Linguistics*, 6 (1), 60-70.
- Department for Education and Welsh Office (1995) *Modern foreign languages in the National Curriculum*. London: HMSO.

David R. Wilson teaches French, German and students with special educational needs at Harton School in England.

