Authentic Materials

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Editor's Note

This issue marks the introduction of our new Authentic Materials column, which we hope will help you identify and evaluate useful authentic materials from a variety of sources, including the World Wide Web. Leading this effort is Jonathon Reinhardt, Director of the Language Resource Center at Colby College. Please join me in welcoming Jon, and we encourage you to contact him about topics or resources you'd like him to address in future columns.

Promoting On-line Resources: the LRC Homepage

There's a Saturday Night Live skit where an American French class visits Paris. The American teacher corrects the pronunciation of two Frenchmen he overhears. Of course, they are offended and beat him up, much to the delight of the students, who had been tortured by the teacher with endless pronunciation drills. The idea of a persnickety language teacher getting his just desserts is funny to us, especially to those of us who as students suspected the foreign language in our textbooks wasn't really the language used on foreign streets. How many of us have gotten off a plane after semesters of tapes and tests, only to realize that much of the language we learned in school is seldom used, even archaic?

A student will be much more receptive to a learning task that she feels is relevant to her needs. If the language used in the task is authentic, she will be more likely to learn. This is supported by second language acquisition research, which claims that authenticity of task and input is necessary for acquisition to occur. Of course, language instructors have long known the value of bringing authentic materials into the classroom. For students who may know a culture only through textbooks and popular stereotypes, authentic material makes a culture, and its language, real.

In the early years, the language lab was little more than an audiocassette library lined with travel posters, a place where authentic materials were rather scarce, save perhaps a few old

magazines and newspapers. When videocassettes first appeared, we immediately saw the pedagogical usefulness of their authenticity, and struggled with different formats and standards to build video libraries. When satellite broadcasting appeared, we were excited about the idea that students would able to watch authentic broadcasts from the target culture. Satellite broadcasting has expanded so much over the last few decades that even channels in lesser-taught languages can be brought into the language classroom. Finally, the recent expansion and availability of the World Wide Web means that authentic materials in the form of hypermedia are just a click away. Only ten years ago, if you had told a language instructor that hundreds of newspapers, news magazines, radio and TV stations in the target language would be at their fingertips, they would have been ecstatic at the possibilities. Now that the day has come, many instructors find themselves not only overjoyed, but also overwhelmed by the number of authentic resources available to them.

Which is one reason most language labs have redefined themselves as language resource centers, as one of our major roles has become to manage resources for use by foreign language students and faculty. As the WWW has grown, managing, developing, and promoting resources that are on-line has become one of the major tasks of LRC professionals. How can we make these on-line resources accessible and relevant to language faculty and students?

Many LRC's have developed homepages that act as portals through which LRC users can access the specific on-line resources they need, including center information and hours, help pages, materials databases, and digitized audio materials. The LRC homepage is also the ideal location for lists of external links to on-line resources: study resources such as dictionaries and grammar tutorials, media resources such as news and cultural organizations, and pedagogical resources for instructors.

Creating the Web site requires the LRC professional to don his webmaster hat (which is probably pretty well worn after all that use trying to digitize streaming audio files). Web design and development are skills that build with time and practice, and the site itself should be well thought-out and maybe even field-tested. Its completion should be announced and promoted with newsletters and workshops, and it can become a focus of LRC orientation sessions for students and open houses for faculty. Of

course it needs to be updated regularly once it's in use.

On the resources links pages, annotated, well-organized lists of reasonable length are more user-friendly, as quality is preferable to quantity. Searching for these Web sites and evaluating them requires the LRC professional to put a librarian/editor hat on top of his webmaster hat. The job requires collecting, organizing and evaluating Web sites, although much of the evaluating work has probably already been done by language departments and faculty webmasters, central libraries, and fellow LRC professionals at other schools—these are places to start. While many Web sites have been developed especially for the language learner, many would argue that authentic Web sites are more useful learning resources, especially for more advanced students. Here are a few places to look:

Television and Broadcast Media

Television media Web sites are especially useful because the Web sites usually act as companion Web sites to broadcast programs, with stories for reading and streaming audio and video broadcasts for listening. The widespread availability of actual broadcasts opens the door to activities combining reading Web sites together with watching satellite broadcasts. Thousands of TV and radio stations around the world now have homepages with schedules and program companion Web sites. Many are multilingual, meaning that translations of popular stories are easy to come by.

> • http://www.cnn.com/INDEX/languages/ - CNN.com
> Available in six languages

> • http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/index.shtml - BBC World Service
> Available in 43 languages

> • http://www.tv5.org/indextv5.html - TV5: le monde en français
> Like many other stations around the world, TV5 programs are also satellite broadcast on SCOLA and the International Channel

Newspapers and Periodicals

Periodical homepages are huge sources of authentic materials— probably every major newspaper on the planet has some sort of on-line presence, usually updated daily. Many newspapers aim to be a Web portal for their native readers and so contain much more than just news; information on local events,

interesting stories, cartoons, and even games make such Web sites especially useful as a cultural portals for students. Besides sources for simple reading activities, these sites provide authentic data for concordancing or vocabulary activities.

• http://inkpot.com/news/ - Inkpot's International News Links
Links to hundreds of newspapers around the globe

• http://www.languagebox.com/ - The Language Box
With links to hundreds of media organizations all over the world, not just newspapers

• http://www.terra.es/ - Terra
A Spanish-language portal site with mirror sites for nearly every Spanish-speaking country

Museums and Cultural Institutions

Museum homepages usually showcase their exhibits with cool designs and the latest multimedia bells and whistles; many have become virtual museums in and of themselves. These Web sites can be used in the classroom as resources for research projects/Web quests or treasure hunts, and are of course of great use for classes or units that focus on history or art. The sites are usually multilingual, and some even offer teaching ideas for virtual visits.

• http://www.chinavista.com/beijing/gugong/!start.html - The Forbidden City
Includes a virtual tour

• http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/ - The Hermitagehttp://www.welfenburg.de/ - Welfenburg: Abenteuer Mittelalter
A virtual museum experience devoted to medieval German cultural history ◆