



Keeping It Re

Pat Guiney advocates the use of authentic content in the language classroom

For years, theorists and cutting-edge language educators alike have been advocating a move away from rote learning and grammar-centered instruction. Many believe that facilitating content-driven, learner-centered acquisition is a better approach. However, until recently, there were few resources available to achieve this. But as language learning moves from textbooks to the online realm, a great opportunity has presented itself: easily and inexpensively immersing the student in a wide variety of authentic language produced by and for native speakers. Sure, there have been offline resources in the past, but they tended to be costly and cumbersome. Students could immerse themselves in authentic content through unmediated video and audio recordings, but limited comprehension often led to frustration and abandonment. For authentic content immersion to be truly effective, there must be some interactive element, some mediator, available to make the material accessible and enjoyable. In full-blown, in-person immersion, that means being able to ask native speakers to repeat, define, clarify, or otherwise simplify their language. Virtual immersion needs a mediator as well — a virtual mediator. The challenge facing new language-learning technologies is this: how do you combine authentic, engaging, culturally relevant content with the tools and resources that language learners need to benefit from it?

Mediation between the learner and the content can take many forms. It may include the ability to control the delivery to match the student's desired pace. It may consist of traditional materials — translation glossaries, annotations, content-specific lessons, and so on. It may incorporate a new technology or the insightful use of an old one. Successful language-learning products must employ a mediation strategy that best suits their content, their presentation, and their audience.

Several products are available, for example: Yabla, which immerses learners in authentic, interactive video content; the Think! and Champs-Élysées series of audio/print magazines; La Guinguette, featuring French-only audio immersion; and Linguality, which provides

annotated works of literature in French and Italian. There's also Babylon's one-click translation software, which students can use to explore authentic print content on the Web.

In its purest form, authentic content is created by and for native speakers of a given language. This may include online newspapers and magazines, streaming audio and video, and online clips of TV shows and films. These sources help immerse language learners in the real-life contextual, conversational, and idiomatic realm of a language. Of course, the fact that the content is not tailored to the needs of students means it can be bewildering and disorienting. About.com's German learning site has an article about how to approach such content, entitled "Techniques for Using Authentic Language Sources on the Web." Though the article focuses on German, its tenets can, of course, be applied to any language. It recommends that students listen to authentic content often, and advises them not to worry if they don't understand every word — or even most words. Also, it recommends focusing on a simple task. For example, when listening to a weather report, try to simply come away with an idea of the forecast for tomorrow. When you're not sure what's being said, try to glean it from the context. In other words, rely on context as a mediator. Some useful questions might be: What's the general topic at hand? Who's the audience? Looking for contextual clues instead of running to a dictionary can help students progress beyond textbook learning and better navigate real-world settings, where there is not always time nor opportunity to explore every newly introduced element of discourse.

Of course, even if you heed the good advice in the About.com article, diving into raw authentic content without a concrete mediating tool can be frustrating. Babylon (babylon.com) offers a useful tool for the navigation of authentic print content from the Web, such as foreign-language newspapers, magazines, and blogs. Their downloadable application allows users one-click access to dictionaries, includ-

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ing bilingual dictionaries, covering 75 languages. Babylon does better than other dictionary software: it examines the context of the word you click. For example, if you click the word “hot” in the phrase “hot dog,” it understands that you might want to know the translation for both “hot” and “hot dog.” Its many dictionaries and glossaries allow the user to cross-reference any text in order to not only arrive at the proper contextual meaning but to get a sense of how meanings vary — one of the trickiest aspects of language learning. With this hover-and-click tool installed on any Windows or Mac computer, foreign newspapers and magazines, once daunting, suddenly become rich terrains for accessible exploration.

Yabla (yabla.com) combines authentic, foreign-language video with useful learning tools in a creative way, providing a richly featured language-learning environment. With its French and Spanish Web sites (french.yabla.com and spanish.yabla.com), Yabla takes real videos from the Francophone and Spanish-speaking world and adds dual captions in both the original language and English. Students can show or hide either set of captions independently, slow down the videos, click on any word to get dictionary definitions, and develop listening and spelling skills using a randomly generated cloze exercise. According to Marion Yudow, director of Rutgers University’s Language Institute, “The linguistically and culturally authentic Yabla videos help to develop effective listening comprehension skills because students, in order to function effectively in any target language, must learn to understand the natural speed and rhythms of native speakers.” Yabla’s content is drawn from a wide range of sources: music videos, news, cooking segments, man-on-the-street interviews, documentaries, and dramatic programs. Many were made for foreign-language television and some were shot and produced by Yabla’s own production arm. Because of this range, you hear the authentic vernacular of people of varying ages, cultures, and places (each video is coded according to its specific regional accent; for example, “French Canadian”).

Yabla’s interactive tools work to address the problem of raw content. Students don’t have to worry if they don’t understand every word they hear; Yabla’s dual-language captions, dictionaries, and variable-speed playback take the pressure off. Students can hear a new word, read it, read the translation, click the definition: these are the mediators that help make sense of authentic language content. Teachers can choose videos and assign them to students with due dates and goals attached. The word-replacement game, which builds listening and vocabulary skills, can be made part of the curriculum to ensure a desired level of engagement. Most importantly, students can access their accounts from anywhere online.

The Think! series (Think French!, Think Italian!, and Think Spanish!, slpublish.com) integrates authentic voices and realistic contexts into the learning experience. Think! supplements monthly language-learning magazines with audio files in which the articles in the magazines are read by native speakers in a variety of regional accents. Here, the handy print magazine is the mediator that facilitates understanding of the audio. The audio content itself is spoken by native speakers. It is created for learners, yet strives to maintain an authentic style. As a result, language learners don’t feel patronized or pressured — the method is touted on the Think Spanish! home page (www.readspanish.com) as a “non-intimidating approach to language learning.” The Think! audio magazines capture an essential element of immersive learning: when you’re surrounded by native voices in an authentic, credible context, you “forget” that you’re learning; paradoxically, that’s when learning becomes easier. (Think Spanish! started as a print publication with an audio CD included, but seems to be moving in the direction of purely online delivery with its newer releases in French and Italian).

Champs-Elysées (champs-elysees.com), another audio/print magazine producer, provides “authentic all-audio language programs for intermediate-to-advanced speakers of French, Spanish, Italian, and

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German,” as its Web site declares. Champs-Élysées aims to replicate the experience of listening to authentic radio broadcasts. All of the programs feature professional European broadcasters speaking as though they were on the air. The content is not precisely authentic, in the sense of being produced by and for native speakers, but even native speakers may well be fooled. David Ralston, head of Online Marketing and European Operations at Champs-Élysées, says, “The 60-minute audio presentation is scripted with a foreign audience in mind although the speech delivery is not adapted in any way for the intended audience.” Their site further explains, “While the programs are produced expressly for the purpose of cultural and linguistic instruction and are not broadcast anywhere, some of the interviews and features have been previously broadcast as parts of other news programs.” This disclaimer is really a point in Champs-Élysées’ favor: they create plausible-seeming broadcasts, sometimes going as far as to “mash up” excerpts from actual, authentic programs into content that would be of interest to a language learner. “The programs are aimed at intermediate-to-advanced speakers of the target language who have a good grammar base and who are looking to improve their listening comprehension and ability to speak the language within the right context,” says Ralston. “[W]e hope to help users gain confidence in using vocabulary in an accurate and nuanced way.”


La Guinguette (www.laguinguette.com) is another product that

focuses on audio. “Guinguette” is a French nickname for “café” — the sort of place where students in actual immersion programs would do well to spend lots of time soaking in the banter. This virtual guinguette offers its patrons access to audio news features, interviews, and other content voiced by native speakers, accompanied by mediating transcripts, translations, and notes. Their goal is to provide learners of French with access to authentic sound recordings of French as it is spoken today by commissioning a team of professional French journalists to provide the reports. The interviewees speak at normal speed, unaware that their listeners are learners of French rather than native speakers. Whether content is, strictly speaking, “authentic” or not, students can reap the benefits of language immersion if what they’re hearing is the everyday, conversational language of native speakers who are not “talking down” to them.

Wes Green, who founded Champs-Élysées, has strong feelings about the value of authenticity to language learners. “Learn-to-speak courses ignore the reality of the spoken language,” he says. “Nobody in Madrid or Mexico City speaks second-year Spanish. You have to tune your ear to authentic speech.” This premise underlies Champs-Élysées, with its native speakers and scenarios. The print accompaniment to the Champs-Élysées audiobooks contains translations of the more difficult spoken language, serving as the mediator between the authentic content and the student. With his new company, Linguality (linguality.com), Green has applied that same model to a most venerable technology: the book. The Linguality idea — they call it the “Linguality Theory” — is that once you understand the “core lexicon” of a language, the words people use most frequently, you no longer need to read translations of literary works in that language. What you need instead is an annotated edition. Linguality books have the original text on one page and English translations of difficult words and phrases on the other, so you can easily move back and forth as necessary. The technology may be old-school, but the idea is on the mark for schools today: give students real literature, as it was written, with unobtrusive mediation that illuminates the text just as it reduces learning frustration.

Yabla, with its interactive tools and access to truly authentic video content; the Think! series, Champs-Élysées, and La Guinguette, with their audio content that mimics authenticity; and Babylon, with its advanced but simple-to-use mediation of raw print content, are in the vanguard of a movement to make authentic content an accessible and enjoyable medium for language acquisition. Technology plays no small role in these innovations. Yabla employs the ease and power of real-time Web delivery to reach learners at home, at the lab, or anywhere they bring their laptop. Think!, Champs-Élysées, and La Guinguette allow users to listen to the content on their mp3 players — an adroit adaptation to the fact that today, people do everything on the go, including learning. Linguality proves that you don’t need new-fangled technology to elegantly connect authentic content to language learners through a simple mediator. For those who have championed a shift away from rote learning and toward organic acquisition, this is all very encouraging indeed. **X**

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