



Animating Young Learners

David Burke, known as “Slangman,” has made it his life’s mission to break the boundaries that separate people of different cultures. Now, he is poised to break a barrier of his own by making the leap from author to TV host of a new children’s show.

Slangman’s World is set to air a series of episodes on the American Forces Network (AFN) later this year. The show introduces young children to foreign languages and cultures through animation and song. AFN broadcasts to 175 countries around the world. Is this trained musician and self-proclaimed language nerd, ready for the international stage?

“My whole career has been about ignoring the rules,” Burke says. “The rules of traditional language teaching, the rules for building a career, the rules for producing a TV show. If I’m not doing something unconventional, I’m not doing it right.”

Burke’s career in languages began with a misunderstanding. Although he grew up in a multilingual family where English, French, Hungarian, Polish, and Yiddish were regularly spoken, he was still underprepared for his first trip abroad. While staying in Paris as a teenager, he insulted his French host by unknowingly using French slang, and then informed the entire family that he was pregnant.

Although considered fluent in French, Burke was unable to effectively communicate with everyday French people. He came back to the U.S. with renewed energy and focus for what he calls “the true key to fluency”: slang and idioms.

“To understand a culture, you have to learn everything about it; the technical aspects of the language aren’t enough,” Burke says. “You have to learn how natives really speak. What you’ll find is a colorful, ever-changing jumble of slang every bit as important as traditional grammar and vocabulary.” He adds, “Most teachers don’t like it when I say that.”

Slangman’s first books on foreign language slang and idioms were published by John Wiley & Sons. *Street French*, *Street Spanish*, *Street German*, and *Street Italian* are still in print now, in revised editions, almost twenty years later.



David Burke acts on the green-screen set for his cast of characters including Slangbot, Mrs. Scabby, Gooney Bird, Cammy, Wordy and others.



Taking Class Online

I have been fascinated by the explosion of web-based computer programs that have potential for use in schools. It seems to me that a new website, program, or tool is developed on a weekly (perhaps daily?) basis and that the possibilities are endless for teaching all subject areas — especially languages. As someone who considers herself fairly technologically savvy, I embrace these new opportunities, and yet I often feel overwhelmed by the sheer quantities of new sites and programs for education. Teachers with whom I have spoken on this topic report feeling that their students are miles ahead of them — and that the gap gets wider each day. Most teachers are uncomfortable with this lack of understanding of web-based technologies and want to do something about it. The good news is that getting into these technologies can be easy — and fun!

Just as the song goes, “Let’s start from the very beginning.” Here are some of the most popular Web 2.0 technologies currently available on the Internet plus suggested websites for you to explore:

Web 2.0

This term refers to the “second version” of web applications. It is similar to the labeling of software when it gets an update (i.e., “Version 3.1 of Microsoft Word”). Web 2.0 technologies include blogs, wikis, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. These Internet-based services allow users to collaborate, share, and co-construct multimedia documents and websites.

■ Try Classroom 2.0 (www.Classroom20.com) for a community of teachers using Web 2.0 technologies in their classrooms

Blogs

Blogs can be used as online portfolios or journals. They allow users to build a website with chronological postings of text (often the blogger’s feelings on a given topic), photos, and even to insert audio or video files. Visitors to a blog can comment on the user’s postings, thus creating a dialog between blogger and visitor.

■ Try Blogger (www.Blogger.com) or ClassChatter (www.ClassChatter.com)

Social Networking Sites

Websites that offer users a network on which to post personal profiles, videos, music and other files, and to share the site with invited friends. Users tend to share hobbies, musical tastes, or just connect to old friends via these sites.

■ Try Facebook (www.Facebook.com) or MySpace (www.MySpace.com)

Podcasts

Despite the name, you do not need an iPod to hear a podcast! A podcast consists of a collection of digital sound files that you can access over the Internet. You can subscribe to podcasts, or listen to single episodes.

■ Try iTunes (www.apple.com/education/itunesu/)

Virtual Worlds

Three-dimensional virtual reality worlds like Second Life are online spaces in which users create an “avatar” that allows them to interact with other virtual residents. Universities such as MIT and Harvard are even represented in Second Life, as well as cities like Paris!

■ Try Second Life (www.secondlife.com, note: you must first download free software to your computer to start using Second Life)

Avatar Creation Sites

An avatar is a digital representation of you. You can design your own avatar to look just like you, or you can take on the persona of a famous celebrity, an animal, or a historical figure! Avatar sites often allow users to record their own voice and to send messages to others using the avatar persona.

■ Try Voki (www.voki.com)