

Beyond Babel: Language learning online

By Uschi Felix, with contributions by practitioners

Melbourne: Language Australia, 2001, CD and book (378pp.), ISBN 1-876768-25-8, AU\$77.00, £42.63*; CD only AU\$27.50, £21.74*; book only AU\$55, £30.88*. (*Available in Europe from Camsoft: www.camsoftpartners.co.uk, Sterling prices include UK postage and packaging.)

Reviewed by Chris Hall, Joensuu

Beyond Babel is Uschi Felix's second book on language learning on the Web, following on from her successful *Virtual language learning: Finding the gems amongst the pebbles* (1998). Indeed, Part 2 of the present work contains an updated version of some of the information from the first book, but there is so much new material here that it is fully justified to regard this as a new book.

The book's intended readership is defined by Felix as follows:

- Teachers who wish to develop their own courses or materials on the WWW;
- Teachers who wish to integrate interesting websites and ideas into their curriculum;
- Teachers and researchers who are interested in student perceptions of the web environment;
- Anyone who wishes to refresh or improve a language, or get a feel for a new one in the comfort of their own home;
- People who wish to learn more about approaches to web-based language teaching, and, in general, to delivering courses on the web. (p. 7f.)

Given the current interest in the Web, this should include the great majority of language teachers and many adult, independent language learners.

Beyond Babel consists of three parts. Part 1 is a collection of eight contributions by authors with experience of developing their own language learning material on the WWW. There is a great variety as to the languages involved, the intended audience, the level, the financial and other resources available, and the approaches chosen, so language teachers who are thinking about developing their own material are very likely to find something to interest them. Part 2 provides details of a number of example websites for various languages. This part is included on the CD-ROM, which means that websites can be visited conveniently and quickly at the click of the mouse. Part 3 contains a discussion of the value of web-based language learning, including two studies by Uschi Felix on students' views on the viability of the web as a language learning tool, a chapter on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of web-based language learning, and a final chapter with general conclusions, implications and recommendations.

The detailed discussion which follows concentrates on the German material in the book, as this is what most of the readers of this journal will be interested in. However, it should be noted that all of the practitioners' contributions in Part I raise issues which are language-independent and that many of the example websites contain innovative features which can be of benefit to those developing web-based material in other languages.

Part 1 contains two chapters on German, the first of which, "InterDeutsch – Going solo" by Claudia Popov describes the development of a commercial German website for advanced learners on a zero budget. The problems which Popov describes in working with no dedicated funding for a major project and the solutions which she found will interest many others who are in the position of developing material with next to no funding or not doing it at all. A failed attempt at collaboration with a German coursebook publisher is also a timely warning that commercial companies are not always in a position to support even initiatives which would benefit them in the long term. At present the [InterDeutsch](#) website contains three courses: "Deutsch für den Alltag", "Deutsch zum Auftanken", and "Deutsch für den Beruf" as well as the "Studienbibliothek", a collection of exercises, games and tests, material for children, links to online dictionaries and publishers, and a page of book tips (linked to Amazon.de). An attractive feature of the courses is that they are tailored to the individual student's needs on the basis of information provided on the registration form and

in the entrance test, which all students have to pass. Popov's chapter contains a description of the linguistic-methodological approach (based on the "natural approach", Tschirner 1999) and an outline of the material provided for one student on the course "Deutsch für den Alltag". It is not possible to examine the course material on the website, as it is only available to students who have signed up for courses. The Studienbibliothek is freely accessible, though, and contains a great deal of interesting material, some of it in the form of links to existing sites. The cost of €125 for four weekly lessons on the first two courses and €175 for four lessons of "Deutsch für den Beruf" will place the courses out of many people's reach, but given the fact that courses are matched to students' needs and that individual feedback is provided, it may represent value for money. Overall the website is well designed and contains many elements of general interest.

The second German project, described in the chapter "Online German for secondary school students" by Stefo Stojanovski, Fred Hollingsworth and Jennifer Saynor-Locke, is in many ways the exact opposite of the first. It is a well-funded project of the Victorian School of Languages (VSL) to produce a year-long distance education course for high school beginner students (GN101/102). German is one of seven languages for which distance learning materials are being developed, and the eventual aim is to produce materials for the seven languages on six levels, resulting in a total of 42 year-long online courses. The rationale for the development of the course, the mode of delivery (using the Blackboard course delivery software in preference to Web CT), the development of materials, the pedagogical and technical approaches, the feedback provided to students, and initial student responses are all described well in the chapter. However, the material itself could not be accessed on the VSL website, in spite of readers being told that they can log on using "guest" as username and password, so it was not possible to evaluate the quality of the finished product, or indeed to find any ideas or tips which might be useful to those developing their own material.

This raises the question of how projects like these can benefit the development of online language teaching resources in general. Unless some form of (presumably limited) access can be provided to bona fide researchers and courseware developers, a website will not have any impact on the CALL community at large and we will be facing a situation in

which courseware developers cannot avoid the “reinvention of the wheel” which Uschi Felix quite rightly hopes her book will discourage (p. 7). Fortunately, some of the other sites described in Part 1 of this book are more freely accessible, such as those for Korean, French and Japanese. The *Online Learning Environment for English for Middle Eastern Studies* is freely accessible, but it contains only a small amount of material and seems to have been last updated on 15.2.2000.

In her introduction to Part 2, Uschi Felix stresses the speed of development in web-based language learning since the publication of her first book in 1998. This is the main reason for this new survey only three years after the first one. Web resources have been included which “(a) have the potential to be integrated into existing courses, (b) are instantly usable without a teacher where adequate online feedback is provided, (c) are free or available at reasonable cost or for credit, and (d) are substantial or provide useful self-contained activities” (p.192). Part 2 lists approximately 200 websites, each with a short description, under 18 headings. As in the first part, German sites are well represented. Examples of the headings are “Substantial materials or whole subjects”, “Grammar and grammar-based material”, “Magazines and creative writing”, “Co-operative ventures”, and “MOOS, MUDS and MUSHES”. There are also sites for children, resources for teachers, tools (templates for quizzes and tests), and metasites, e.g. collections of links to online grammars and dictionaries. Some of the sites included are well-known to many German teachers, e.g. the Goethe-Institut’s sites [Lina und Leo](#), an imaginative and well-constructed beginners course, and [Deutsch lernen mit Jetzt online](#), an extensive site with exercises based on the youth magazine *Jetzt* (which has already been discussed in detail in *GFL* in Rösler 2000). Others, however, are not so well-known, e.g. the substantial Swedish site [LernNetz](#), or offer new and interesting kinds of material, e.g. [Christkindl’s Weihnachtsseiten](#), which contains a large number of texts and pictures on the theme of Christmas, another Goethe-Institut site [Odyssee – Ein interkulturelles E-mail-Suchspiel](#), in which school classes can participate, or [Pictures of Austria](#), in which each picture opens a “window” on an aspect of Austrian culture and society. Demanding sites offering the opportunity to work with authentic language are the MUD [MorgenGrauen](#), “ein textorientiertes Mehrpersonen-Rollen- und Abenteuerspiel”, and chat sites such as [Planet Talk](#), which is described as “one of the most user-friendly chat sites on the subject of love and fun in Germany”. Apart from sites

devoted solely to German, there are many sites containing material for a number of languages, e.g. [WELL](#) (Web Enhanced Language Learning), which include German.

Overall the choice of material presented in Part 2 is impeccable and the descriptions well-informed and helpful. Some of the sites were inactive when I tried to access them, but this merely underlines the rapid change in resources on the web.

The research reported on in Part 3 does not attempt to investigate the effectiveness of web-based learning in terms of achievement. Previous studies have come to widely differing conclusions on this point, so Felix has concentrated her research on students' perceptions of the web as a language learning environment. The two detailed studies included here are interesting not only for their conclusions, but also because they clearly show the problems confronting a researcher trying to find partners to collaborate in an international study. Many of the people who originally expressed interest in taking part in these projects had to withdraw at a later stage for a variety of reasons (change of job, problems with the technology, lack of time, etc.). Consequently, the final participants were largely Australian, with just a few from other countries, but there is no reason to believe that this makes the results less valid. The studies show that learners of all ages feel comfortable and enjoy learning on the web, and that the levels of comfort and enjoyment grow with experience over time. A clear majority also found the web useful for language learning, with younger students more strongly of this opinion than older ones. Unsurprisingly, the biggest hindrance to web-based learning is malfunctioning technology. Most of the students wanted access to a teacher, preferably face-to-face, but distance learning students were happy with an online tutor. The presentation of the research leads to some recommendations and design implications, which, while not new or revolutionary, are sensible and well-founded.

The book has been carefully edited, but inevitably there are occasional errors, e.g. the German town of *Soest* is spelt *Söst* (p. 288); Philippe Delcloque, formerly of the University of Abertay Dundee, is given as affiliated to the University of Dundee (p. 282), and the journal *ReCALL* is said to have occasional issues online on the Cambridge University Press website (p. 290), whereas in fact back issues (at present from May 1996 to November 1999) are available online on the EUROCALL website (www.hull.ac.uk/cti/eurocall/recall/r_online.htm).

In summary, this is a well-researched book which will be useful to courseware developers and teachers of many different languages. The accompanying CD makes the exploration of the websites discussed much easier, and its usefulness is enhanced by the inclusion of the whole text of Felix's first book, *Virtual language learning: Finding the gems amongst the pebbles*, which will be attractive to those who have not already purchased the earlier book.

References

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