The LLL SIG Newsletter

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Facilitating Online Language Training for Mature Learners – Part 1

For mature learners interested in tackling a new language, or developing one they already have some background in, there are a number of formats to serve you. Self-study textbooks, classroom courses (or, if you have the means, private tutors) and TV language learning programs come to mind. These study modes are relatively familiar and well within the mature learner's comfort zone. But what happens when senior students go online to develop their skills? Too often, the learning experience can be frustrating with disappointments on a number of levels. This needn't be the case.

This is the first of a three-part e-article which describes the challenges faced in the creation of an "all inclusive" website for developing basic foreign language skills. The site, www.sulantra.com, incorporates a curriculum and pedagogy developed through classroom-based research that I have conducted over three decades (yes, I am "mature", too) using a selection of European and Asian languages as the target. In the classroom research, students ranged in age from adolescents to seniors. (My oldest student was a 93-year-old gentleman in Gotemba who showed up in class with a walker eager to learn French!) About five years ago, I decided to develop an online version of the training system, which would allow learners to study "any language, anywhere". I soon realized that if I wanted to include "anyone" in the mix, special considerations would have to be made.

I refer to my curriculum and pedagogy as *ABLE*, which stands for

"Action-Based Language Empowerment". The goal of each *ABLE* classroom-based program is to prepare learners with enough basic language, as well as communication strategies, so they can function on the streets of a foreign country in as short a time as possible. The material is function-based (we focus on getting a specific job done) and, at the end of most courses, participants literally rush to the airport, jump on a plane and within hours find themselves on the street. They confirm their communication skills in a series of *in situ* tests, asking strangers for directions, ordering meals in cafes, bargaining for presents in a local market, buying bus tickets to specific destinations... In other words, survive.

The *ABLE* curriculum is structured in thematic modules (e.g. shopping or using local transportation) and learners move through several of these modules in a single lesson. When an entire set of modules is completed at one level, learners move up to the next level where language is automatically recycled and expanded in a giant spiral (see Diagram 1: A language learning spiral with 4 functions and 6 levels). This makes the core language easy to remember, a critical aspect for mature learners. The modular, spiraling format also makes the training system ideal for online application – assuming you are comfortable studying on a computer.

Watching my 20-ish aged university students moving in and out of their virtual realities, I find it hard to remember the days when computers didn't exist. But that is because I work in the computer sciences department of a Japanese university and these machines come with the job. Talking with my younger brothers, I frequently realize that the use of computers is not quite as pervasive as I assume. Whether two-finger typing a short e-mail message or giving up on a Google link, computers are intimidating for them. Every time I suggest a computer-based solution to some mundane problem, the fraternal response is usually "Yeah, right...", which translates as "I give up."

Like my brothers, many mature learners may come out of an online experience thinking they are some form of low-tech dummy, doomed to be left by the wayside as others (i.e. the "technically gifted" younger generations) take advantage of the endless opportunities the Internet has to offer, including language training. In academic circles, there is talk of the

"digital divide", which refers to the growing gap between those who have access to online information and opportunities, and those who don't. The reasons given for this divide are varied, for example, limited income, location or gender, but I have yet to come across a definition of "digital divide" that includes age as a factor. This is odd given that just a generation ago, apart from a few lab technicians in white coats, masks and hairnets (seriously!), computers were not part of anyone's reality. It is almost as if the online community assumes older generations will not be around much longer and need not be considered as a component of the digital divide world.

So how do we make it easier for mature learners to go online and remain there? In the second part of this online article, I will describe in detail the design measures taken to make our language training website all-inclusive and accessible for learners of every age.

For further discussion of mature learners and language training, visit the author's blog at the following link:
http://blog.donmaybin.com/2011/12/26-improving-with-age.html

Diagram 1: A language learning spiral with 4 functions and 6 levels