

The LLL SIG Newsletter

Don Maybin teaches at Shonan Institute of Technology. He is a former director of the Language Institute of Japan and co-creator of www.sulantra.com, a multi-lingual website for training users in basic, functional language skills. This e-article, the second installment of a three-part paper, is based on his presentation of the same name given for the Japan Association of Language Teacher's Lifelong Language Learning Special Interest Group on October 1, 2011 in Tokyo.

Facilitating Online Language Training for Mature Learners – Part 2

This is the second section of a three-part e-article describing the challenges faced in the creation of an “all inclusive” website, www.sulantra.com, which incorporates an experimental curriculum and pedagogy to develop basic skills in a foreign language. In the first section, I described the classroom-based background to the online training system, including a brief description of the modular, spiraling format of the training approach, which makes it easier for mature language to remember key language for accomplishing specific tasks. Finally, I mentioned the “digital divide”, a term which is used to describe those people who are cut off from online information and experiences due to gender, geographical location, economic conditions and, of course, age.

In the second part of this e-article, I will talk about the design measures required to make [Sulantra.com](http://www.sulantra.com) more accessible for learners of every age. A fundamental component of any e-learning context is to provide clear instruction in language the user understands – his or her own. There are plenty of English language learning websites – with directions in English. I suppose it works if you are already quite competent in English, but we assume our users are absolute or very

low beginners and would be much more comfortable with a UI in their mother tongue. Besides, why should a Japanese speaker have to wade through English directions in order to learn Italian? (Having said that, some Japanese users do register with English to learn another language to “kill two birds with one stone.”)

In Sulantra.com, we enter each language as a target language to learn AND as a *user language* from which to access every other language course in our system (see Diagram 2: Sulantra.com interactive language “mesh”). The platform is complex, but it ensures that all languages are given equal treatment and all learners are given access to our website if they speak one of the languages that we have already uploaded.

Because of this principle of “equal treatment” for all languages, several other technical features are required in the design starting with the login process. The system must allow for a wider range of writing systems that can be entered from left to right (Italian, Korean) or right to left (Arabic, Hebrew). To make signing in even easier, ID and passwords have been kept short and simple with a minimum of four letters only. Perhaps a little less secure, but certainly easier to remember. Other technical revisions included the removal of “hovering” where information appears as a pop-up when the user’s mouse is left in one place for more than a second or two. One older test subject from Bulgaria had trouble grasping the concept then found it distracting once he did. Perhaps more fundamental is the number of clicks necessary to activate a feature. The difference between a single click and double click proved frustrating for older users who clicked repetitively when things did not seem to be going as planned. (This brought back memories of

my own first messy handling of a mouse!) The solution, of course, was to make the number of clicks irrelevant.

All of the above are components of the user interface – or UI – the steps, directions and buttons you have to click in order to move through a website. The UI is the backbone of any site and it should be simple, straightforward and intuitive, resulting in a hassle-free online experience for the user. Sadly, for a mature audience the UI can be a nightmare. Even popular shopping sites, such as Amazon or Rakuten, can be surprisingly complicated for first-time users who get confused by menu bars and perturbed by message boxes that appear when problems occur.

In the case of Sulantra.com, our first hurdle was our systems engineer, Yoh. As a youthful “gamer” who spends hours online playing computer games, his original designs were elegant and lovely to look at but hell to maneuver through with hidden menus that were, well, hidden. In one “creative discussion”, I complained that many users would be lost in his design and head for the door – if they could find it! I then suggested he work with a specific person in mind, for example, his mother. As it turned out, she plays computer games, too! Notching up the argument, I asked Yoh to design for his grandmother, to which he replied, “But she doesn’t use a computer.” The obvious answer was to design screens that were so simple and intuitive she would, which is what we have tried to do.

My personal peeve with many UI’s is that important buttons are difficult to locate. I can’t find the tree I want in the forest on my screen! Different people look at different places on their computer screens – what is “right in front of you” for one

user may be invisible for someone like me who is less familiar with online design protocols. A well-designed site has several points on the screen where the user can click to achieve the same action.

When testing our website, we deliberately used learners over 60 who spoke out loud as they worked their way through the sign-up process then completed several modules of an online course. It soon became obvious that one large button at the top or bottom of the screen was inadequate. Many users simply could not see it. Other times, the button would be just off the screen in the area below but the user was unfamiliar with scrolling, or moving the screen up and down to locate specific sections. If the button was not visible, some mature users would simply wait wondering out loud what to do next or, worse, close the screen.

Solutions were sometimes extreme. We made the UI for Sulantra.com “design redundant” with buttons for the same purpose located in several places in plain view. But for some users, even this “redundancy” was inadequate. Eventually we programmed buttons to change color and/or flash if the user took an inordinate amount of time to click the screen and move on to the next stage in the course. As for drop menus and hovering, we left them out altogether, while menu bars have gone through several incarnations for greater simplicity. Although it may not be very flashy, “simple” is the guideline we follow to make our site more inclusive.

Another core feature of our online pedagogy is conversation management training. Our goal was to prepare users so that they could ask someone to speak more slowly, repeat or provide an unknown word. We achieved it by combining key phrases used for managing conversation, such as “Pardon?” or “More slowly,

please.” with icons the user clicks to activate a response. This means the user decides when he or she wants repetition or slower delivery, thus, recognizing the need and contextualizing the key language. In a classroom, learner tolerance for repeated drilling of key phrases can be low for students of any age. Our online system lets users decide when they want to hear the language again – and again. The choice for repetition is personal, not imposed.

Many people have asked why we have gone to so much trouble, time and cost to create Sulantra.com. For myself the main reason is family. I have loved ones who would like to learn French (my mother’s school teacher was from Quebec), Spanish (my brother and his wife frequently visit the Yucatan and wish they could say more than “Una cerveza, por favor.”), Swahili (my youngest aunt has talked wistfully of seeing wildebeests on the Veldt in Tanzania) and Polish (my oldest aunt wants to know what her mother-in-law *really* thinks). Many of these people have limited formal education, but are intelligent and motivated to learn like so many others around the world. They would study online if they could find a site that does not intimidate them from the first click of the mouse. This is why the technical side, particularly the UI, for any e-learning website is so critical. And just as in a real world classroom, you may have only one opportunity to “hook” the online learner.

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>

Target Language(L2) → ↓ Instructional Language(L1)	English	Chinese	Turkish	Spanish	New language
English	❖	Eng>Chin	Eng>Tur	Eng>Span	Eng>NL
Chinese	Chin>Eng	❖	Chin>Tur	Chin>Span	Chin>NL
Turkish	Tur>Eng	Tur>Chin	❖	Tur>Span	Tur>NL
Spanish	Span>Eng	Span>Chin	Span>Tur	❖	Span>NL
New language	NL>Eng	NL>Chin	NL>Tur	NL>Span	❖

Diagram 2: Sulantra.com interactive language “mesh”