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 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 3

We now come to the third and final section of my e-article describing the challenges faced in the creation of our "all inclusive" language learning website, www.sulantra.com. In Part 1, I explained the classroom-based origins of the training system and mentioned the "digital divide", an "under-class" of those who have limited or no access to resources online due to gender, geography, economic status or age. In Part 2, I described the technical considerations required in order to ensure the website is all inclusive, in particular, with regard to the design of the user interface. In this final section, I will talk about those aspects of the website which are more obvious for the user, including content, sound and visual components.

The structure of Sulantra.com is radically different from other language learning sites with short modules that are taught in a "horizontal" progression, which moves from topic to topic and automatically recycles and expands language in a giant spiral. On the other hand, the actual content is comparable to other training materials which focus on language specific to thematic areas for learners who intend to travel abroad or use the target language with overseas visitors (e.g. people

working in the service sector).

Content is one area where other websites do (unintentionally) cater to older learners by duplicating materials that are already in print. It is much easier and economical to make minor revisions to an existing textbook, add some obligatory interactive components, then debut a "revolutionary new" online product. Although mature learners may find such "e-texts" friendly and familiar, other users (think secondary school students and up) will most likely be unimpressed and move on. Given the potential for innovative approaches online, a traditional text format just doesn't make much of an impression.

In an attempt to appeal to a younger demographic (i.e. the largest potential audience) creators of online courses generally design for a 20-something crowd using flashy fonts, splashes of color, abstract or "anime" type visuals, hidden menus, and photos of young, perky models. Where is the gray hair (or no hair, like me)? Seriously, the visuals for online language training materials seem to contain no one over 25 and can leave one feeling like a dinosaur!

It is harder to identify with a lesson when you are obviously excluded from the content in terms of scenes, sound and core language. To be fair, some websites do make allowances for mature users but, sorry, putting texts in `larger font` sizes is not enough (not to mention rather condescending). Every aspect of a language training website should be considered in order to truly cater to an older demographic.

On the surface, content may seem almost identical in situational language courses on or offline. But is it really so generic? In the case of Sulantra.com, the study material includes such standard functions as ordering in a restaurant or asking for directions on the street, but it also contains themes of importance for older learners, such as dealing with medical needs.

At the word level, discrepancies become even more apparent. It is quite easy to check an online course to confirm if it has what you are looking for. Simply search for specific words, which are relevant to your reality by simultaneously pushing "control" and "F" (for "find") and typing a relevant word in the box that appears. Chances are sections titled "Introductions" or "Meeting People" will answer the question "What do you do?" with "I'm an engineer." rather than "I'm retired."

This relevancy-to-age variable is also evident when looking at words with the same meaning. Different generations use different terms and, where several choices are available, things can become complicated. Which word do you go with? In Sulantra.com we have tried to include both age-specific language, as well as generic, "universal" language. The result is that some terms may appear slightly dated for younger users; however, these latter items tend to be more polite and generally applicable. For example, in German, the word "schmutzig" for "unclean" or "dirty" is generally understood and polite, but apparently less used by under-30's than "dreckig". After a heated discussion in the studio, specifically between an 83-year-old father and his 24-year-old daughter, we decided to go with "schmutzig".

Another age-related problem in many languages is that of formality with at least two levels of politeness, "formal" and "informal", to choose from. For example, in French "vous" (formal) and "tu" (informal) can be used for "you". Which do you go with? Our rule has been to find a middle register and, if one is not available, to err on the side of politeness. In general, we go with a formal form, unless the polite version is excessively long, in which case we go with the shorter, less formal form.

As it turns out, the polite "vous" is actually easier for the learner to apply since the resulting formal verb forms have less variation and are easier to produce – a fact that surprised the younger French voice actors we recorded with in Bordeaux who felt that "tu" was more applicable. Our work with younger, non-teaching native speakers onsite often shows they lack the awareness of what is more socially acceptable and, in this case, easier for a non-native to say.

Once the core script for a language has been prepared, we get ready to head into a recording studio. Part of the process includes deciding which voices to record. Our goal is to use "natural" language, the kind a visitor to a country would hear on the street. Based on our experiences in the ten languages we have already uploaded, some of the worst voices for this kind of recording belong to teachers and actors! These professionals, who work with language on a daily basis, tend to speak too carefully, analyzing each phrase then delivering it slowly with clear enunciation to "help" the learner. Too bad that no one in the real world speaks like that.

After a few disastrous studio sessions with teachers and actors, we decided to go with "average" people from all walks – and ages – of life. To date our oldest voice actor has been the 83-year-old German speaker, Hans, mentioned above. His voice is obviously older; however, several "younger" speakers in their 60's are indistinguishable from the 20-something voices we have also used. In fact, in informal voice/age recognition tests carried out at conference presentations, the audience inevitably gives the age of one of our Spanish speakers, Javier, as "50 or 60". He was 24 years old when we recorded his voice.

In building Sulantra.com's database of recordings, our criteria has been a standard accent delivered at regular speed, which preserves "natural" speech features, such as contractions, and isn't overly enunciated. Another key criteria for us has been to identify and record pleasant sounding voices, irrespective of age, that you could comfortably listen to for an hour or more.

Perhaps the most obvious feature for the user of any website is what we see on the screen, starting with the dominant color scheme of a site. We think of color as a personal preference, yet the tinted glasses through which we see the world are derived from life experiences with family and friends at school and in the workplace associated with a specific part of the world.

The core team working on Sulantra.com hales from Bulgaria, Canada, China, Japan

and the USA. Choosing base colors for our website proved to be a nightmare. What appeared as a tasteful shade of purple for a younger Bulgarian woman represented the color of a garish love-hotel sign for an older Japanese man. In the end, the only color, which did not have a strong negative connotation, turned out to be green. Subsequent investigation also revealed that green was the holy color of Islam (no tensions in our upcoming Arabic course). It was not offensive for the languages in our system – at the least the ones that we have uploaded so far.

Once we had determined our general color scheme, the next visual component to prepare was the graphics and photos to illustrate the meaning of each item for every language in our database, a monumental task given that there are over 5,000 visuals for each course. As expected, there were once again conflicts based on the different age-based cultures of each user.

On the other hand, certain visuals elicited a uniform – and stereotypical – response. Our user tests showed that, when asked to guess what words were being taught using photos of older individuals, even mature learners tended to associate such visuals with "grandfather/grandmother", not "husband/wife" or "sister/brother". It seems that we have all been conditioned to associate age with a rigid set of meanings. In our website, we consciously include a diverse set of subjects with different nationalities, skin tones and ages to represent a wide range of language items. Our hope is that users will become more flexible in how they view others both online and offline.

Ultimately, the focus of all of our efforts was the people who sign in and study a language course online. In order to confirm that most of the bugs had been ironed out of our system, we ran a series of beta tests with a wide range of users, including mature learners from different language and culture backgrounds. As they say, "the proof is in the pudding" and we wanted to keep as many people as possible happy.

A striking feature of these tests is that despite the difference in cultural

backgrounds, questions and criticisms were surprisingly similar, including difficulties with the content and user interface, an ongoing challenge as we continue to evolve our UI in response to user feedback. For example, three older women (Suzanne in Quebec, Kathy in Colorado and Liao in Szechuan) all pointed out that we had used two different visuals to represent the same family member (*mother*). It was clear that they had become "attached" to the visual component of their courses and found this "aberration" disturbing. (One of the women went so far as to say that she felt "betrayed".) This could possibly be another area where more mature learners (in particular, women?) differ from their younger counterparts.

In an effort to make our language training website all inclusive for mature learners, we have dedicated a great deal of energy into simplifying technical features of the system, adapting the user interface, and adjusting sound, content and visual components. Our goal is to provide a simple, more enjoyable e-learning experience for everyone. Adding design features that work for mature learners, you soon realize that these same features assist *all* learners, both young and old. Hopefully, our ongoing revisions will create a more "flexible" attitude among users – who may realize that a visual of someone over 50 does not mean "grandfather"!

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