

## REVIEW OF *BEYOND BABEL: LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE*

### Beyond Babel: Language Learning Online

Uschi Felix

2001

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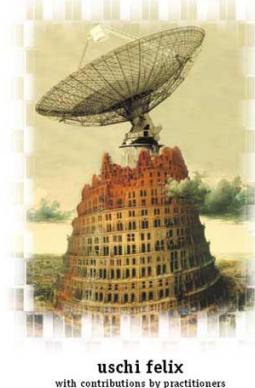
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### Beyond Babel: language learning online



### Reviewed by Esperanza Rom n-Mendoza, George Mason University

*Beyond Babel*, by Uschi Felix, builds on *Virtual Language Learning: Finding the Gems Amongst the Pebbles*, published by the same author in 1998. *Beyond Babel* consists of a CD-ROM which includes links to all the Web resources listed in the book, the complete text of *Virtual Language Learning*, and links to the Web resources from the 1998 volume. The author plans to publish an updated version of the CD-ROM every 2 years.

*Beyond Babel* is aimed at a wide readership including language teachers interested in creating their own Web-based materials or utilizing Web sites for teaching; teachers, and researchers interested in investigating student perceptions of Web-based language learning; and individuals interested in utilizing or improving their language skills via Web-based materials. The book is divided in **three parts**: a collection of contributor-authored case studies of language teaching using the Web, a compilation of Web-based resources for language teaching (an updated and expanded list similar to the one in *Virtual Language Learning*), and a report on empirical research of students' perceptions about Web-based language learning.

Part 1, "Development: Doing it with more or less," contains eight contributions, each describing the integration of the Web into language courses. Languages covered in this part of the book include Chinese, English as a Foreign Language, French, German, Japanese, and Korean. Institutions represented are not as diverse, with contributors from Australia dominating with six articles, three of them from Monash University in Melbourne. Nonetheless, the collection provides a very complete overview of the different levels of teacher involvement in Web-based language teaching. Also noteworthy is the fact that contributions represent projects with a wide variety of technical and financial support, ranging from some with essentially no budget to projects with \$500,000AU (\$259,650US). Each article contains a summary page with the name of course, name(s) of the developers, budget, mode of delivery, and URL.

In "InterDeutsch -- going solo: First steps into virtual teaching on a zero budget," Claudia Popov from [InterDeutsch](#) (Leipzig, Germany) presents a commercial site that offers three 4-week long individualized distance German courses at the intermediate and advanced level. Students take an entrance test after which they are presented with a specific study plan for 4 weeks. Study plans consist of reading texts, questions, exercises, and a weekly writing activity corrected by a tutor. Students have mandatory chat

room meetings and may use additional materials available through the Studienbibliothek. While access to courses is restricted, materials in the Studienbibliothek are open and have received very positive feedback from teachers and learners of German.

In "Advanced EFL online: How can it help?," Miriam Schcolnik from Tel Aviv University (Israel) describes the development and implementation of an [Online Learning Environment](#) (OLE) for undergraduate students enrolled in an English course for Middle Eastern Studies. In this project, OLE is not meant to replace classroom interaction but "to provide further opportunities for information searching, meaningful interaction, and sharing of both educational processes and products" (p. 31). The article provides a detailed and bibliographically well-documented report on the project rationale, aims, instructional objectives, and development criteria, as well as a complete description of the assessment process and its results. Particularly useful are the tables explaining the implementation of the instructional objectives in the three learning environments (i.e., face-to-face, home/library, OLE) and the means used to assess the different course activities (pp. 32-34). Forms, observation protocol sheets, and questionnaires are provided in the appendices.

In "A resource centre on the Net: A model for less commonly taught languages," Injung Cho describes the development and implementation of an [online resource center](#) for the program in Korean at Monash University (Melbourne, Australia). The center contains learning materials organized in flexible micro-components, one Web-based BBS and three mailing lists, which complement face-to-face instruction during the first three years of the Korean program. The center aims to promote autonomous learning, to attract students with scheduling problems, to increase communication between native and non-native speakers of Korean, to provide opportunities for professional development to teachers of Korean, and to serve as basis for future distance learning courses.

"Going online: Can language teachers go it alone and is it worth the heartache?" by Sally Staddon, also from Monash University, reports on a project to create a Web site for a [beginning French course](#) and the pedagogical approach followed during the development process. The site has been developed under the premise that "the pedagogical need for, and value of, what is intended must drive the creation of any CALL materials" (p. 82), although technical considerations and administrative criteria also have to be taken into account.

In "Sakura: An interactive site for Japanese language learners," Takako Tomoda and Brian May describe [Sakura](#), a Web site developed at Monash University for beginning students of Japanese. Sakura contains online exercises and tasks designed to complement face-to-face instruction. The article describes the development process and the problems encountered both by the designers and the end-users of the site, which include difficulties handling Japanese characters, using the keyboard, and accessing the site from home.

"Online German for secondary school students" by Stefo Stojanovski, Fred Hollingsworth, and Jennifer Saynor-Locke focuses on a [German course](#)<sup>1</sup> developed at the Victorian School of Languages (Victoria, Australia). The article describes the adaptation of a traditional secondary school German course to an online environment using Blackboard. Stojanovski, Hollingsworth, and Saynor-Locke also analyze the pros and cons of distance education and the need for this kind of training is needed in the specific educational context.

"Building 'Bridges': Design issues for a Web-based Chinese course" by Jane Orton describes [Bridges to China](#),<sup>2</sup> an intermediate-level Chinese distance course developed at the University of Melbourne (Australia). The course consists of texts, exercises, and quizzes, supplemented by an audio CD and a video CD. Students are required to watch six films (available from state providers) and to take part in a 2-week study tour to China. The course takes advantage of the Web's potential to present information (through colors, hypertext, and help windows), to provide for extensive language practice, to monitor student progress, and to motivate students' participation. Course assessment has been very positive since

materials have been proven to allow for "progression from recognition to manipulation throughout the course" (p. 155).

"Worlds of words: Tales for language teachers" by J. Tuner from Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane, Australia) is a case study not of a specific course, but rather of a particular technological environment: the use of MOO spaces as "stages for interaction and collaboration" (p. 165) in the language classroom. At Queensland University of Technology, MOOs were first integrated in classroom activities as a rehearsal space, and then utilized as a constructive and creative space. A list of educational MOOs for different subjects and languages is also included.

Part 2, "Virtual Language Learning Revisited," provides a comprehensive annotated list of more than 600 Web-based language learning resources for approximately 80 languages. The number of resources varies from 30 or 40 items for commonly taught languages such as English, French, German and Spanish, to just one for many of the less-commonly-taught languages. For languages with a large number of available resources, various criteria for selection were applied, such as their potential to be integrated into courses and their immediate usability. The resources are classified according to type of resource (see Table 1) but an index is included at the end of this section to facilitate the location of resources by language.

The categorization of sites is very effective for providing a clear picture of how the Web is being used in the field of language learning, even though, as the author explains in the introduction, there is some overlap among categories. *Beyond Babel's* categories have been updated since the publication of *Virtual Language Learning's* to reflect the new developments as well as feedback received by the author.

Table 1. Categories in *Beyond Babel* and *Virtual Language Learning*

<b>Beyond Babel (2001)</b>	<b>Virtual Language Learning (1998)</b>
A. Integrated materials	Integrated materials
B. Substantial materials or whole subjects	Substantial materials/whole subjects
C. Substantial materials -- commercial or protected	Substantial materials -- protected
D. Small courses and bits and pieces	Activities/Exercises/Tasks based on textbook or magazine
E. Grammar and grammar-based material	Grammar instruction/pronunciation/dialogues - traditional
F. Publishers' sites	Grammar/ vocabulary exercises -- interactive with feedback
G. Magazines and creative writing	Sites in target language country providing authentic interaction
H. Tools	Moos/ Muds/ Mushes
I. Self-contained interactive tasks	Self-contained interactive tasks -- ideas
J. Web tasks	Self-contained interactive tasks -- proformas to print or submit
K. Webquests and simulations	Structured teaching plans for interactive tasks
L. Co-operative ventures	Interactive tasks -- using Chat sites
M. MOOS, MUDS, & MUSHES	
N. Chat sites	
O. Sites for Children	
P. Structured Teaching Plans for Interactive Tasks	
Q. Professional Development & Resources for Teachers	
R. Metasites	

Part 3, "Absolutely Worth the Effort," focuses on research issues related to the integration of the Web into language learning. To this aim, Felix describes two studies of university, high school, and elementary school students' perception of the Web as a learning environment.<sup>3</sup> The studies also explored whether students' opinions were related to their learning styles, learning strategies, and study preference.<sup>4</sup> Qualitative and quantitative data from both studies show that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages of using online materials for language learning. Nevertheless, the studies were not able to document a relationship between individual learning styles, strategies, and preferences and "perceptions of comfort, enjoyment and usefulness of materials" (p. 351). In order to get a more substantial body of qualitative and quantitative data, which may document a closer relationship between learning styles and students' perceptions of the usefulness of the Web, Felix has embarked in 2002 in a [large-scale project](#) involving students in as many different languages as possible.

In conclusion, *Beyond Babel* contains extremely useful information for the intended audience of the volume. Teachers who want to develop materials and/or integrate existing resources into their curriculum will likely learn from the detailed case studies and as well as discover some new Web-based resources; researchers will identify areas for further research on student perceptions of learning and on learning outcomes; and language learners will find a wealth of useful Web sites. Felix's plan to update the resources every two years can minimize the negative effects of the dynamism that characterizes the Web. As noted elsewhere (i.e., Sussex, 1999), the CD-ROM solution may not be quickest and most effective choice for this purpose, but it certainly provides the author with the best solution to protect the excellent results of a very labor-intensive endeavor.

## NOTES

1. Readers may login using "guest" as username and password.
2. *Bridges to China* is delivered now via [Open Learning Australia](#), which will offer it from June 2002, with tutorial guidance and accreditation provided by the School of International Business and Asian Studies at Griffith University (Queensland, Australia). A CD-ROM version will be available from the University of Melbourne in July 2002 (Personal communication of Jane Orton, March 2002).
3. Other reports on these studies are available online in Felix 2001a and 2001b.
4. Some of the questionnaires used for these studies are available [online](#).

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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