Web 2.0 and English Language Learning

A New Model or A New Muddle?

□ In the electronic age, we wear all mankind as our skin□

- Marshall McLuhan

(this article is one of a series on my blog - highlighting how educators can publish and get readers online instead of keeping their knowledge behind the heavy iron doors of academia. See the original at "The Captive Mind".)

Overview

There are over a billion English as a foreign or second language learners worldwide. In the United States alone it is estimated that over 25% of the population will speak a mother tongue other than English at home within the next 10 years AND be in need of acquiring the English language for success in school, business and the social realm. It is no overstatement to say that access to and acquiring the English language will be the key ingredient and imperative need of citizens of the 21st century, everywhere in the world. Not just professionally but also socially, as the world meets on the common playing field of the English language.
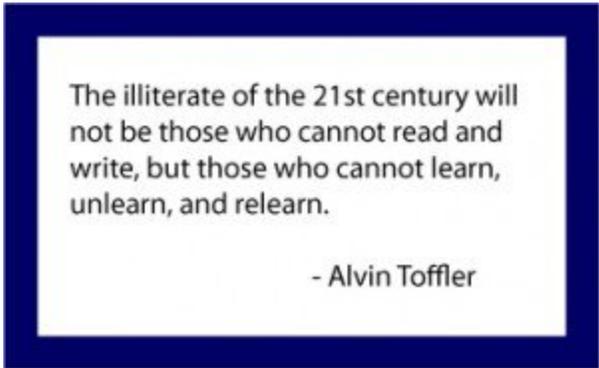
The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

- Alvin Toffler

Language is empowerment and especially so with regards to the very unique paradigm shift happening this early century. As technological advances make travel easy, communication instantaneous and populations more heterogeneous □ a common language, that of English will be the requirement and passport of this new world.

The internet will become a driving force of change this century. It is growing exponentially and access will most certainly become almost ubiquitous within the next few decades. It offers a revolutionary way to empower people globally. Not just politically and socially but mostly personally -- through their own education and voice. Just as the printing press led to the Enlightenment as millions began to learn to read print, the internet will increase the possibility □ the voice and perception of billions.

The combination of a proliferating internet along with the need of millions of people to learn English, offers a vast potential in the educational online market. Also the vast possibility of reaching millions with a tool that will benefit their future. I would offer a quote of William Gibson who summed it up well, □*The future is already here, it□s just unevenly distributed.*□ The internet and online learning offers a unique way to address that imbalance.

The Internet and Language learning

Why the internet?

The internet offers the best way to learn language other than immersion in an English speaking milieu. (and even then, it offers support and a great way to assist language acquisition). The advantages of online learning can be summarized under the following headings;

1) **Access** ☐ the internet offers the possibility to experience English without the need of travel. Even without the need of leaving home or bedroom.

2) **Flexibility**- the internet allows for users to learn language when they want, where they want.

3) **Response** - the internet offers the possibility of instant feedback to learners. This greatly enhances the learning experience.

4) **Repeatability** ☐ the learner can encounter the language in a repetitive fashion until mastery is achieved.

5) **Durability** - the internet is 24/7. It never tires. It doesn☐t take coffee breaks.

6) **Modality** ☐ the internet is a multi modal learning tool. It stimulates in a rich sensory and cognitive and thus fertilizes language acquisition successfully.

7) **Specificity** ☐ the internet allows the language learner choice and variety in both what and with who will be learned. Learning can be tailored to the language learner☐s precise makeup and needs.

8) **Cost** ☐ the internet is a business model which due to economies of scale, can offer services for pennies. It also offers to widen access through a ☐pay as you can☐ dynamic.

Why is the internet specifically good for language learning?

If you generally think of the Internet as a place to "look up stuff" you're missing the best part

Besides the above points, the internet offers both a controlled, repeatable and secure environment for language learning. New technological advances of recent note in the realms of voice and video make it the perfect tool for learning a language.

Web 2.0 in particular is a driving force online which will transform language learning. As learners from diverse geographic, social, political and religious backgrounds gather in the common language learning arena, they will be a social presence to be reckoned with. User generated content and the internet as a society of its own will offer the possibility of learners learning English through controlled interactions. Much like present day ☐Content Based Instruction☐, online language learning will scaffold the learner and give them a helping hand with English while they learn other types of content.

The internet is cheap. Billions of dollars are currently spent learning English as a second language. Books, teachers, facilities, travel ☐ they all cost. The internet offers the potential of completely avoiding these cost so long as the language learning model is successful.

What are the guiding principles of this new kind of learning?

Online learning is guided by several transforming principles that are very different from the traditional models of learning.

1) **Process before Product** -- it is all about the interACTION and not the thing / product itself. The product is no longer the focus but it is the social realm and service that is the focus and of import.

2) **User generated content.** The ☐market☐ is not sold but rather sells. We go from passive construction to active construction. Individualization, personalization pervade.

3) **Education is unhinged from old authoritarian constructs**. It is the use of knowledge that is important and not who controls said knowledge. Know less to be more..... No longer do we need to know when the facts arrive instantly at our fingertips. It is about service, it is about connections and not just that at the ends of the wires. Meritocracy will one day have

complete ascension as the old and dusty formal structures of education slowly erode......We will no longer ask ☐ ☐What have you done and prove it? ☐ but ☐Can you do it and prove it?☐ Sugata Mitra's <u>"Hole in the Wall"</u> project / research is a perfect example of this.

4) **Learning is fun, motivational and is gender and age neutral.** Online learning doesn☐t know if you are 50 or 5. What counts is how you perform. It will transform how we learn and schooling because it frees the learner to learn on their own, their own time, space and way.

5) **Pictures, images are paramount.** The world is regressing into the primitive and ☐cold☐ media are what really will drive the new learning. Pictures and images are taking over from the old forms of print driven learning. This is a big consideration of any new learning model. (see McCluhan and his The Mechanical Bride especially).

What would a successful language learning model look like?

It would have to meet some specific criteria to be a success and also be driven by those savvy in the new age of ☐people☐. This is an important and crucial factor. More than anything, decisions in the new social networking, online realm will be decided by perceived trust and personality. There are many possible avenues to proceed but they would all have some key similarities. I will discuss what measures I think would be best given the following:

Rationale:

The site must have a steady and overriding rationale. This is commonly referred to as a ☐mission statement☐ in business but in the realm of online learning and business, it must be much more than just a buzz word. The rationale will guide all the strings holding the site together. It is the puppet master.

I see the best rationale as one focused on RESULTS. It is a human need to see, feel, want results and to see change. None more so or greater than in language learning. The best schools, those with the most students knocking on their doors have and will always be those that get results (be they real or perceived, this point is really mute when it comes to a rationale).

Many language learning models focus on accessibility or entertainment or social mingling......these are driving forces but none so basic as the compulsion to SEE, HEAR, FEEL real language growth. If you can show a user that they are improving, you will have a successful model ☐ all else equal.

The problem with language is that it is not results friendly. It takes a long time to acquire a language. A person must encounter a word in a new context, up to 100+ times before they ☐know☐ it / own it. An online site must mitigate this through motivational techniques, constant encouragement and testing and even the false promotion of progress (an age old technique of any wonderful teacher.....).

Just think about how impossible it is for you to predict what your life is going to be like in four or six years... being ready for anything is the only rational strategy.

So, why exactly are you planning on the future being

just like it is now, but with better uniforms?

Framework.

The best possible framework would be to age and grade the users. This would mean a site with at least 3 different groups; children , teens, adults. Also, a site which would allow for grading of ability within these core groups and the ability to acquire grades/points to advance up in excellence. If some kind of system that is untraditional could be implemented, so much the better. Not grades/levels but some kind of organic scale ?????

I do not believe it beneficial to focus in on just one area such as business, travel, teachers etc....... The framework should be built upon the age and level of students given that the core technique/technology is such that it will offer the greatest benefit to
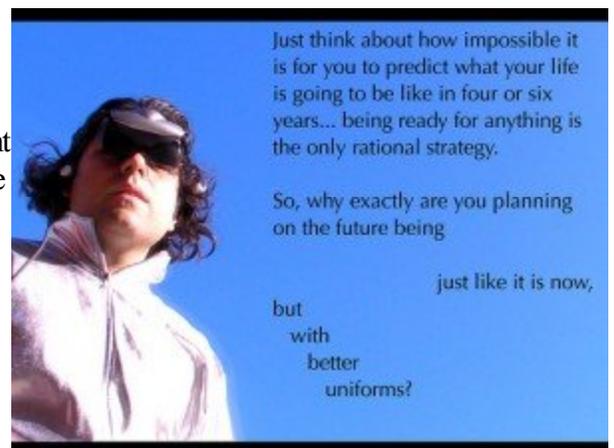
the greatest number. The internet is about either very small scale or very large NOT in between. In fact, in between doesn□t really exist but is rather a purgatory of □will it succeed or won□t it?□

Environment:

The Look and Feel of the site is also paramount and to be tailored for each grade/level. A human feel is very important. Language is closest of all to □humanity□ and thus, the site must be flush with faces and warmth. It can□t be cool and steely.

There is definitely a real need for a physical space. I don□t think 3D is the way to go and I have spent endless hours on Second Life and really consider it a failure. Especially for education because it is just too disorienting.....Virtual is NOT real and this plain fact runs against learning and interferes fundamentally with the learning process.

What kind of physical space? There are many options. I could envision for the young a physical space which runs along narrative lines. A quest. Going from world to world and gaining in language ability until the secret treasure map is filled. For teens, obviously it would have to music. The city street, alive with music. Making friends and talking music. For adults, it could be a shopping mall where people mingle, eat, do stuff.....It could be an office/business space....

I think though, the physical space should be a community. Or maybe even just a Learning Center with lots of rooms for different groups / levels. As users gained language efficiency and were tested, they could take the elevator up until finally reaching the top floor swimming pool. There could be areas for video (cinema), socializing (bar/lounge), sleeping (hotel room), fitness (vocabulary building), performance (theatre) , eating (self study), singing (karaoke bar) etc.......

I do think rather than just an arid focus on technology, this kind of space is needed. But it has to be open ended and flexible.

Know How / Technology

Presently, technology and especially streaming video and VOIP (voice over internet protocol) have made it not just possible but absolutely certain that the internet will be the place most people learn / study English in the future. There simply aren□t enough native speakers to meet the demand.

The technological focus must be on only a few key components. They should drive all the various aspects of learning. I see the most fruitful and those which are the most □human□. This is key in language learning. If you want to succeed, you have to offer what real life offers and MORE..... (this is a rule of the net, an undeclared one).

How to make it human?

User generated content is a must. It must allow users the ability to make content and deliver/share with others. This is a sine qua non of any Web 2.0 site. It should also have personality, be people driven. Highlighting people and showcasing members. The model of this next century for all business will be not that □the customer is right□ (the last century□s business crie de coeur) but rather, □It□s about ME, stupid□. Businesses that get that right, will thrive.

Making it human will be real time voice. Speech recognition and its use as the core technology for learning will be a marvel and draw learners to the site. It could be something that will drive users to the site and for sure, this technology is key. Use of bots are a very live possibility and though it might not be fruitful to focus fully here, it should be a consideration for just a few years down the road.

Translation technology in my opinion should be avoided like the plague. People don□t want to pay money or spend time on anything but the REAL THING. Just Coke Classic please. The translation area would be a whole other business altogether but I see people learning English before wholly adopting any translation tool (even if it be a fantastic one) wholly because of
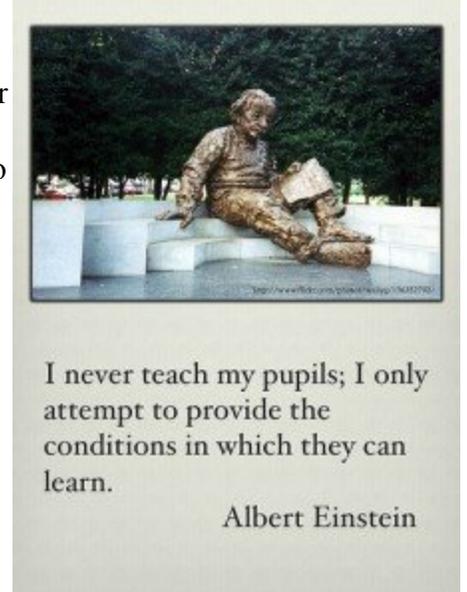
my above noted ☐human☐ premise when it comes to language.

Pedagogy

Strict attention to pedagogical principles are necessary. I see 4 key areas to focus on; the affective domain, comprehensible input/repeatability, testing/assessment and content/curriculum

The affective domain

People learn because they feel good, secure and safe. This is very much the case with language in particular. Stress, boredom, outside interference, lack of confidence in the class or teacher ☐ all effect the learning process. An online language site should proffer happiness and positive feedback. It should provide constant reinforcement along with content. Signally, ☐Well done!☐ ☐Great job☐. As well, learners should be allowed to be reflective and judge their own performance (monitored). This is crucial in language learning and making learners ☐self ☐ aware and correcting☐. The site should be a happy and spirited place.

I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.

Albert Einstein

Comprehensible input and repeatability

Learners fail to learn language quickly for many reasons but most prevalent among all are that they don☐t encounter the same language enough (repeatability) nor at a comprehensible enough level. Input is primary and the online environment should introduce new language and structures slowly and incrementally so as to avoid ☐interference☐ in the learning process. We learn language even when we conscious think we know it. Why so? Because first language appears masters and then it IS mastered or as Heraclites so well stated, ☐latent structure rules obvious structure.☐

Learners must be set up to succeed. That entails manipulating their learning environment so they believe they are learning but not at too fast a level. Guided/leveled reading has been an instrumental movement in this regard but this kind of ☐extensive reading☐ format through the power of technology can be applied to oral language. Further, technology can provide control of the learner and feedback to the learner in terms of new vocabulary, word counts, mastery, speed of speech, comprehension etc.....

Testing and Assessment

Sharing, and sharing online specifically, is not in addition to the work of being an educator. It is the work. Ewan Mcintosh

Based on a rationale of results, this component is fundamental and must be strong. Learners need to be constantly challenged in fun, motivating and ☐non traditional☐ methods. They should have access to detailed data on their learning and this is one very significant plus of language learning ☐ the ability to endow the learner with confidence through constant feedback.

Learners should also be able to gauge their progress through proper leveling and promotion and even a certification process. Though not necessary, a certification process should be an option and would lend authority to any type of pedagogical focus the site would have.....

Content and curriculum

What would the students learn? Obviously, the curriculum is the whole English language but what would be use and how

would it be tailored to the learner?

Content should allow for much user choice. This is something the internet offers and should encourage. But the curriculum should have some structure and not just in the sense of □level□. I think the proper curriculum for the English language (but not all languages), is one based on competencies. What the speaker can do. This would also compliment a □results□ based focus.

Learners could chose the content but would have to gain some mastery or competency for the particular content before they could move up in level. For example a business man could study introductions in a business setting but the same competencies as a youngster on the street would be mastered □ the ability to greet and say good bye.

Competencies would govern the level and achievement. The content would add variety and motivation and be learner driven. We learn best when we choose something we are interested in.....

Marketing

I don□t have much to say here. Only that non-traditional means should be tried and the market should not be primarily thought of as □those people using the internet.□ This might seem wrong but it is my opinion that those who really succeed in promoting their business or their internet application are those who drive new users to the internet and reach □outside the cables□. If people have a desire to learn a language, you have to market outside the internet and drive people online □ to get your product. Think of the internet as a store. Would you just advertise your sales in store or along the street outside?

Economics

Obviously there would have to be a sustainable business model. Traditionally this is in the form of some ratio of user payment and advertisement revenue. I think user revenue has a huge potential in language learning, with businesses and organizations (especially governments) paying vast sums for access to proven educational tools. Teachers could also offer services online and pay a premium. Personalization of services in many forms would offer revenue streams.
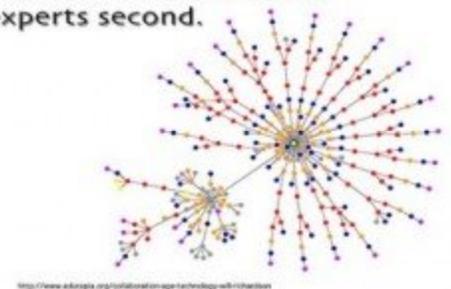
I think though, the best economic model is to have a transformational idea. You have to be first to the pot (why? So you can get your hand on the spoon ....others may come afterward but it will be you spooning that soup!).

As I stated at the beginning, the right □personal□ touch on the site would be so important. In this new century, learners will want the human touch (because we are beginning to lose it so much in our every day life). The site should ooze this and parade it. Further, there must be a focus on the personal and on gossip/human interest. People like to talk about people. It is a basic fact. This should be a large part of the curriculum along with stories. Of course, guided with a pedagogical focus which would sell the whole learning approach.

...we as educators need to reconsider our roles in students' lives, to think of ourselves as connectors first and content experts second.
Will Richardson

http://www.edutopia.org/collaboration-age-technology-will-richardson

The potential market is vast. Even though the window of opportunity (of massive English language learning as we go through this transformational period) may be as short as 30 years, it is long enough. Further, I believe that providing a language learning tool for so many is somehow revolutionary. You can say all you want about technology but unless it really offers learning □ it is just another toy and tinkle in the sound room of life. But give a person learning , like the old adage of □teaching them how to fish□, you really profit the whole world......an amazing thing to do and be involved in.

Here is a presentation offering some more quotes/inspiration. Also here.

We can never discover new continents until we have the courage to lose sight of all coasts.

-Andre Gide

Image: sailing across the ocean blue by eyesplashMikul http://www.flickr.com/photos/37335357@N00/2530584100