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Electronic literacy with and attitudes towards the web as a resource for foreign language learning

Book Section

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Electronic literacy with and attitudes towards the Web as a resource for Foreign Language Learning.

1 Introduction:

In their Web Skills for Language Learners publication from the WELL (Web Enhanced Language Learning) project, Charlie Mansfield and Tony McNeill (1998) say that the World Wide Web is useful for language teachers and learners

> "because the World Wide Web has now become the major delivery medium for text, graphics, sound as well as video with thousands of businesses, universities, government departments and individuals setting up their own pages, it is an invaluable source of authentic materials for language teachers and learners (…) including most, if not all, of the languages currently taught in universities throughout the UK."

The Humanities Computing Unit of Oxford University says in its website that:

> "it is clear that the Internet is one of the most fashionable areas of computing. It is affecting all subjects in Higher Education, not only altering teaching opportunities because of its new perspectives on communication and dissemination, but also opening up new *resources* for students and lecturers alike."

Along with the provision of grammars, dictionaries and exercises, one of the most common uses of the World Wide Web for foreign language learning is as a resource for essay topics and culture of the areas where the language is spoken. Language tutors regularly ask their students to find information about a given issue. This is not only for cultural reasons, but to develop both motivation and to expose them to the language in the hope for acquisition with attention to form.

This use is based on "authentic" material, that is, web pages that have been written not for specific language learning purposes but as information tools mainly for the use of native speakers. Language learners can benefit from these in the same manners as they have from traditional sources of information such as books, newspapers, brochures etc. Students can access this information online and thus access up-to-date material, which they can use for their research on a number of essay topics as traditionally they would the library. The students

have access to different varieties of the language, can find data on all the different areas where it is spoken, geography, history, government etc. Most of these resources are available as texts, although some are available on audio and video as well.

In addition, reading on the Web is different from reading a printed text. Warschauer (1999a) says that "reading the Web means intelligently finding, evaluating, and making uses of a great variety of sources of information" (p. 158). Ganderton (1998) cites Cobb and Stevens saying that hypertext is the most significant aspect of the Web: it facilitates various routes inside a text, which, unlike printed text, does not have a fixed beginning, end or middle. He also mentions Snyder, who takes the view that the reader of online texts creates their own text by deciding what parts to read.

But do users really read online? Not according to Nielsen (1997), who found that only 16% of users read online texts word by word and 79% scan rather than read. He also points out the fact that users tend not to scroll either. He outlines four reasons for this:

> 1. Reading from computer screens is tiring, for the eyes and about 25 percent slower than reading from paper.
> 2. The Web is a user-driven medium where users feel that they have to move on and click on things.
> 3. Each page has to compete with hundreds of millions of other pages for the user's attention […] Most pages are in fact not worth the user's time, so experience encourages them to rely on information foraging.
> 4. Modern life is hectic and people simply don't have the time to work too hard for their information.

Nielsen does not specify what he means by scanning. But Taillefer differentiates three types of reading: scanning, to locate specific information, skimming, a quick look to get an overall impression, and reading for meaning.

However, reading the documents is only part of the process. To get there, users need to find the information they need first.

To be proficient at utilising the Web, users, according to Nancy Kaplan (1995), need to be E-literate. Kaplan defines E-literacy as "the knowledge and skill required to make marks in electronic age with electronic devices".

Warchauer (1999b) divides Electronic Literacies into Reading and Research literacies and Writing and authoring strategies. As our area of interest is only concerned with student researching information online for a given task (or resource-based learning), we will only be concerned with the former. Warschauer (1999b, Web document) states that reading well from he screen involves skills such as:

- Being able to find the information to read in the first place (through Internet searches, etc.).
- Being able to rapidly evaluate the source, credibility, and timeliness of the information once it has been located.
- Being able to make rapid navigation decisions as to whether to read the current page of information, pursue links internal or external to the page, or revert back to further searching.
- Being able to make on-the-spot decisions about ways to save or catalogue part of the information on the page, or perhaps the complete page.

When we as language tutors ask students to perform these searches for information we assume that:

a) they know how to perform those searches
b) they like using the web
c) they pay attention to the language

It is essential that these assumptions are examined and researched. There is a need to know what the relationship between learners and the Web is. In their Website[1], the Institute of

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[1] http://iet.open.ac.uk/research/postgraduate/pgopps.html

Educational Technology state that Learners' perceptions of the educational value of multimedia need to be investigated because

> "There is currently a dearth of information about how learners use multimedia components in educational websites, and what they perceive to be the value of particular types of multimedia in relation to their learning. How do learners make decisions about whether or not to access elements such as sound, video, animations, or virtual reality? How motivated are they to persevere when they encounter disappointments or difficulties? Do they actively look for websites that offer specific kinds of media?"

We believe this applies not only to educational websites but to the use of sites aimed at native speakers that are used regularly by FL learners as information sources. Also, learning software, CD Roms, etc go through an exhaustive process of developmental testing to ensure clarity, usability… Websites do not.

There have been studies about motivation (Warschauer) and in particular about attitudes towards or perceptions of CALL and the Web. Eg; Warschauer (1996), Brett (1996), Fox, Holder and Weaver (1998), and Piper, Watson and Wright (1996):

Piper, Watson, and Wright (1996) carried out a study of language learners using the Web in 1995-96. The study aimed at getting a picture of how the Web was used at the Language Centre in Southampton University. They concluded that the Web was used as a reference library. The state that "many lacked the necessary technical, research and linguistic skills, or appropriate learning strategies, either to explore its resources or to use these for language learning" (Piper et al, 1996, p. 12). They recommend more support and training, the provision of more structured starting points, and for the use of the Web to be integrated into the taught courses. They also recommend investigation into "the interactions between the design of the resources, the learning activity and the learners' behaviours" (Piper et al, 1996, p. 12). They agree with Laurillard and Taylor's view that the computer-based learning environment discourages a reflective and adaptive attitude to learning.

This study provides a very clear image of student perceptions of the Web, as well as some of their strategies with it. It does not present a very optimistic picture of the role of the Web for language learning, but many of the obstacles presented were a consequence of the novelty of the medium. So it is very interesting to see whether four years later there have been sufficient changes to warrant a more positive view of the Web as a resource for language learning.

Other studies have been carried out to provide an insight of learner use of the Web in resource-based language learning such as Oliva and Pollastrini (1995), Osuna & Meskill (1998) and Lamb and Fisher (1999). They all found positive features in the use of the Web to increase language and cultural knowledge to different degrees, as well as motivation.

We need to know what processes are involved, how the students go about the search process and what their perceptions of the Web are. There is a need for a descriptive study of internet use in the context of searching for content in a foreign language with special attention to

> how the use the web
> if they like it
> if they pay attention to the language

To provide an attempt at researching these issues, a case study was set up. The aim of this case study was to obtain data on how Foreign Language Higher Education students interact with the Web in general and in the context of a search for content/reading task in particular. Our goal was to produce a descriptive snapshot of student impressions and abilities at one given moment and asked them how they use the Web, what for, how they go about finding the information they need, what they perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of using the Web as a research tool for language learning, to compare it to other resources and what their

attitudes towards it are. In addition, and in a superficial only we also looked at whether they pay attention to language whilst online.

In the following sections we will present the details of the project, the results of the study and discuss those results.

2. Reading tasks for Second Language Learners: the project

A project to obtain the students' impressions of reading tasks on the Web was set up.

A) Participants: the users were 36 (27 females and 9 males) final year students of Spanish at the University of Southampton taking a resource-based module, where throughout the year they were asked to produce newspaper-style articles on current topics in the Spanish-speaking world based on research they carried out with the help of newspaper articles, television broadcasts and the Internet.

B) The questionnaires: there were two: a pre-questionnaire and a post-questionnaire. In some sections they asked questions specific to the task, and in others referring to their use of the Web in general. Most of the questions were open ended to allow for a wide variety of answers and give freedom to the students by not trying to guide their answers towards a number of presumed answers. Thus, there were not any pre-suppositions about their replies. These were adapted from the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology's Programme on Learner Use of Media (PLUM) Webpage[2], which provides two questionnaires for student evaluation of media resources.

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[2] http://iet.open.ac.uk/plum/default.html

C) Methodology: the study was carried out in the last term of 1999. Participants were asked to attend the Spanish resources room for an hour, where the would fill in a pre-task questionnaire, access the web for approximately 30 minutes, and fill in a post-task questionnaire.

3 Results: in this section we will present the replies to the pre and post task questionnaires.

A) The Pre-questionnaire consisted of five questions:

I   It started by questioning the students' hopes for the exercise: what they hoped to learn from their search.

To find the necessary information for the topics	25 (69%)
To learn new vocabulary	10 (28%)
To learn what Spanish web pages are available	3 (8%)
To learn new or more efficient ways to find information	10 (28%)
"Internet skills"	4 (11%)
How to make the most of the time I spend on the Net	2 (6%)
To "gain confidence with the Net"	1

II   The second question referred to the students' use of the Web. They were asked to indicate:

a) why they use the Web

to find information and research topics	35 (97%)
for online email	10 (28%)
to find out news	2 (6%)
Because "it's quick and easy"	5 (14%)
to help my Spanish", jobsearch, holiday or travel information, website creation and "fun"	1 each

b) how often they use it

twice a day	2 (6%)
Daily	9 (25%)
three times a week	2 (6%)
two or three times a week	1 (3%)

twice a week	7 (19%)
once a fortnight	6 (17%)
once every three weeks	1 (3%)

c) how long they usually spend on it

half an hour or less	8 (22%)
Between half and one hour	7 (19%)
one hour	8 (22%)
Between one and two hours	4 (11%)
two hours	7 (19%)

One student indicated she spends "ages because it's so slow".

d) where they access it from

from the university	36 (100%)
from home	10 (28%)

e) whether they discuss what they find on the Web with other students or a lecturer.

with other students	20 (56%)
with lecturers	2 (6%)

III   The third question provided the students with five choices to answer what they use the

Internet for and asked them to provide an example and detail.

Developing your Spanish competence	22 (61%)
Details: newspapers (18), reading materials (5) grammar exercises (3)	
Finding out more about the culture and related areas of the Spanish-speaking world	30 (83%)
Details: essay materials (11), newspapers (10), information on Spain or South America (7), music (1)	
for non-language study purposes	25 (69%)
Details: research for other university subjects (10), jobsearch (8), news (6), general interest (5), travel (1)	
for leisure or general interest	21 (58%)
Details: online email (7), general interest (6), travel (5), jobsearch (4), shopping (3), pornography (3 - incidentally, all male-), news (2), sport (2), chatting, gossip, T.V. listings, and fun (1 each)	
Other	10 (28%)
Details: online email (6), jobsearch (2), website creation and news (1 each)	

IV   The fourth question on the questionnaire asked the students to describe their search

strategies and how they find information on the Web. Thirty-one (86%) of them replied that

they do it by using search engines, ten (28%) the School of Modern Languages homepage, seven (19%) use a previously known address, two mention newspapers and one student comments that she does it by "spending hours" online.

V   The fifth and last question on the questionnaire asked the participants to give their own opinion on how they thought the Internet compares to traditional teaching methods and other media for language related purposes.

In the first section of this question they were asked to compare it with classes and lectures. There was a large range of replies, with some of the students considering the Internet more useful and some completely the opposite. For every comment from a student there seemed to be another from another student stating the opposite. The general impression is that students perceive the Internet as a complement to traditional teaching methods and prefer the latter to the former. Interaction and participation were mentioned by many of the students as something missing from the Internet, as was feedback. They also felt that classes were better tailored for a determinate subject and the Internet for general purposes. Many students, nonetheless, indicated that the Internet was more interesting to them, although finding the information was more difficult and took longer. The Internet was complimented for being more up to date than some lecturers' materials.

Among the comments there were some from students that clearly prefer classes: "I don't really feel confident using the Web", "It's very rare that I feel I have learned anything from the Web (language wise). It's one-sided, takes far too long to find what you're looking for, and once you have (if you do) you have to worry about printers working and it costs money. The whole process is very long", "It's less channelled to your particular needs", "I prefer going to a

lecture because they tell me what I need to know rather than what I think I need to know", "It does not provide the feedback you get from a tutor".

Others from students who prefer the Web: "Internet presents visual information and is more interesting", "It is often easier to obtain wider information via the Web than you would pick up in a class or lectures", "You choose what you want to know", "A more independent way of studying", "There is no comparison! Lectures and classes only teach what the lecturer wants".

And others from students who can see benefits in both: "Internet useful in addition to classes, but in classes you can get things explained", "With lectures it is more personal, in that you can ask directly what your questions are. Sometimes it is difficult to find what you're looking for. Much more variety on the Web, but less information. Easier to learn from teachers really", "As far as language studies, I find it more useful and helpful to learn a language in the classroom with a native speaker; as far as a normal course, I like it better if I work on the Web", "The Internet can be more accessible than lecturers, although the lecturer can give you the information in half the time". Perhaps the general feeling is summed up by a student who says that the Web is "Excellent for backing up lectures but it could not replace classes".

The students seem to rate the Internet a little better when compared to other resources such as reference and course books and topic boxes, but many of the student still prefer traditional methods as their main source of information. The students do not think the Internet can replace or even complement cassettes or T.V. Many of the students praise the fact that it is up to date information, as opposed to books which soon date and do not carry information on recent events. When comparing it to the library, the students disagree: some find the Internet more useful and accessible at all times and some prefer the library. Those in favour of

traditional methods wrote: "traditional methods take less time", "Prefer traditional methods - Internet good for additional information", "I prefer reference and course books because I fully understand how to use them and I don't have to spend hours looking for information", "I find books more easy to access. I've never used audio or video on Internet", "Books and newspapers are easier to read than the Internet", "I prefer to watch foreign T.V. and listen to cassettes as it is easier to integrate myself into the language", "Reference and course books have more information". Those in favour of the Web responded that "Internet is good because you can find exactly what you're looking for much quicker", "Books soon date and Internet can be accessed at any time, unlike the library", "Can be much quicker", "Better on the Web", "I take less time looking it up in a book" and "More interesting than scanning a book for information". Those who saw benefits in both - although with traditional methods ahead on the Internet - replied: "Internet good for reading material, prefer TV for use of language and listening skills", "Easier to search for specific stuff rather than leaf through millions of pages but it's complementary - it doesn't stop me using these other things", "There are some grammar exercises you can do, but I prefer using books", "I don't tend to use the Internet as a substitute for reference and course books", "It is still useful to have books and topic boxes", "More up to date, but lacks exercises and grammar teaching", "Prefer Internet, except audio and video. Course books are necessary: permanent accessible reference"

When compared to other electronic media (CD ROM's, language learning software, email etc.), the Internet was more level, with some of the students preferring it. Again, the fact that it is more up to date was mentioned by three students. Only twenty-five (69%) students responded to this particular question and of those, fifteen admitted they never use the CD-ROMs or other language learning software available in the Language Centre. As regards e-mail, three of the students said that they use it to contact Spanish speakers. Some of their

replies were: "Internet has lots of information easily accessible", "Internet doesn't depend on opening hours but Internet information is harder to find", "Internet is better because there is unlimited information, but can be much more frustrating", "I'd say it's on a par", "Better than electronic media", "CDROMS are limited on material", "CD ROMS are helpful in very specific situations", "Web is as useful as the other media" and "Internet provides "real" information".

B) Post Questionnaire: it consisted of four sections:

I   The first section asked the students to look back at their replies in the pre-questionnaire regarding what they hoped to achieve from the exercise. It asked them to comment on:

(a) what they learned that they hoped to learn:
(b) what they did not learn that they hoped for:
(c) anything they learned that was unexpected:

In response to the first question, out of the twenty-five students who hoped to learn information for the essay topic, sixteen replied that they had learned about the topic, three that they had learned where to find useful articles, two (out of the original ten who had hoped to learn it) mentioned vocabulary and a further two said they had learned to scroll down to find more information. One student said she had learned "Internet skills" (four had hoped to) and another one that she had learned "how to save time and select information". Four students replied that they had learned "nothing", and one mentioned that she "(…) will pick up the phrases/vocabulary when (she) read(s) the hard copy".

The second question provoked more varied answers. Out of the twenty-five students who had hoped to learn about the topic, one did not and another claimed not to have found background

information. Three out of the ten students who had hoped to did not learn new vocabulary or expressions, and a further two thought they had not learnt new structures or grammar. As regards their Internet skills, two did not learn more effective search techniques and one each said they did not learn "how to gain access to Spanish pages", "how to make the whole process quicker", "new ways of finding information" or "how to use the Internet properly".

Video was the unexpected feature for the twelve students who learned that it was possible to watch a video clip on the Net, whilst two students said that they had learned how to change the volume (of the clip), one that the "Times" and the "Telegraph" had a WebPage and another that she had learnt "Internet search strategies".

II   The second section focused on students' interaction with the Web, and it was divided into three sub-sections: navigation, user interface and content. The students were asked to circle "Yes" or "No" to indicate whether they agreed with a number of statements and to provide further comments.

a) The sub-section about navigation contained five statements:

The first statement was "It is clear what options are available". Thirty-two students (89%) answered "yes" and the remaining four (11%) "no". Most of the students said that it was "obvious" or "very clear". Three of the students commented that the options were not very clear at first, another three that the options were clear "If you're familiar with what you're looking for" and a further two said "if you know how to do it". One student said "I often don't have clue where to go and just stick to the sites I know".

The second statement read "It is clear how to get to where you want to be". Twenty-six students (72%) answered "yes" and nine (25%) said "no". The students mentioned here the use of the School of Modern Languages page, bookmarks, links in general and search engines. Two said it could be confusing sometimes and a further student said "it's a bit hit or miss". One student commented that it is different each time and another that luck is involved. Perhaps the statement that summarises the general impression of the students is "Yes if you follow a link but not if you're searching more generally".

It was nearly fifty/fifty for the third statement: "You always know where you are in the Web", as nineteen replied "yes" and seventeen "no". The accompanying comments were therefore varied too, ranging from "never" or "I often get lost" to "very simple" or "self explanatory/it's obvious". Seven students (19%) mentioned that looking at the address lets them know. One student mentioned that yes, she knew where she was "but not necessarily where I want to be", and another that "It can be hard to find a particular page again". A further two students complained that it is easy to lose track of where they have come from.

Twenty-six students (72%) agreed with the fourth statement: "It is easy to know which pages you have already visited", whilst ten (28%) disagreed. The change of colour in links, and the "back" button were mentioned as helpful, as were bookmarks, the "go" option and the "history" option, which, incidentally three of the students who replied "no" do not know it exists, as they claim that there are no records. An interesting quote from this section was "sometimes I access the same page without meaning to".

The students experience trouble whilst using the Internet, as demonstrated by the fact that twenty-nine (81%) of them agree with the fifth and last statement "You have experienced

some kind of trouble while using the Web". For those who replied "yes", the questionnaire followed on by asking "If so, what kind of trouble?". Speed was the main problem as eleven students mentioned it (with two of them adding that because of it being too slow they give up). The next biggest problem for them is broken links or "URL not found" messages (with eight). Four complain of pages not fully loading or transfers interrupted, and a further four have had problems with the server being down. Three students mention having problems with printing and another three with crashing computers. Two students do not know how to play audio or video, another two complain that sometimes they do not know how to exit a page and a further two complain that nothing useful comes up of word searches. One mentions the "back" button not working and another that sometimes pages already visited cannot be found again.

b) The sub-section about user interface contained two statements:

The first one stated that "menus, icons and buttons are easily understood". The vast majority of the students (86%) agreed and only four disagreed, saying that "some icons can't even be guessed at". The students comment that icons are not standardised: "sometimes you have to click on something to understand what it does" and the clarity of symbols "depends on the page", but, in general, they find that "the use of symbols makes everything easier".

The second statement read "Operations are consistent". Thirty-two students answered this question, out of which twenty-eight agreed and four disagreed. One student points out that this varies on different sites, and another mentioned break-downs. Two students alluded to the fact that consistency "depends on the time of day" and a further two to the fact that "sometimes links change overnight/for no reason".

c) The sub-section about content contained three statements:

"The information is easy to find" was the first one. Seventeen of the students replied "yes",
fourteen replied "no" and two replied "yes and no". Amongst their comments, six mentioned
that this depended on the topic they were researching, and four said that most of the
information they find is irrelevant. Two students said that "you have to filter out the
information which isn't exactly what you want" and another two that it is "not always easy to
know where to look". Other students added that "you have to know where you're going" and
"luck is involved". Two students complained again about speed and another two about broken
links and access being denied. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one student said that
sometimes there is "far too much" and another that the process of finding information on the
Internet was "quicker than reading a book in the library".

"The information you find on the Web is sufficiently informative" was the second one and it
appears that, despite the difficulties reported in finding the information, once they have found
it they consider it sufficient, as twenty-nine (81%) agreed with this statement and only four
disagreed. The comments for this statement were mostly positive, such as "I never cease to be
amazed at what I can find", "there's loads of up to date information" and "I've used it for all
my essays". Two students agree that "there's usually a good range of articles and viewpoints"
and another says that "if it's not, it can be found". A few more comments refer to the previous
statement and go into the problems in finding the information rather than the quality of it. The
students point out, however, that one has to know what one is looking for, that luck plays a
part and that it depends on the topic again. Four students find that the information is "not
enough for in-depth topics" whilst one says that sometimes "there's not enough general

information". One last student makes an important comment regarding the authority of what they are reading by writing "you have to be aware of who wrote it".

Their language learning aim does not appear to be a main priority during the process of searching for information as suggested by the replies to the third statement: "you make notes of new vocabulary, expressions or grammar issues you come across when using the Web". Fifteen students (42%) answered "no" and eighteen (50%) "yes", but out of the latter, fourteen specified that they do it after printing, which leaves four students (11%) actually actively and consciously trying to acquire language and realising that one of the aims of the exercise is language acquisition as well as reading comprehension and writing.

III   The third section in the questionnaire focused on the benefits derived from using the Web. It contained an introduction and five questions.

a) The first question was: "Is the Web an efficient learning tool in terms of the time you spend on it and what you learn from it?" Twenty-one students (58%) replied "yes" and eleven (31%) "no". Six students said that it was efficient to access information and three preferred traditional methods: "for grammar and vocabulary I prefer to look in grammar books and do written exercises as I tend to remember things better if I've written it down". Another student, however, said that "proportionally compared to traditional methods it's brilliant". Ten students commented that "it takes too long" and they "waste a lot of time" one wrote that it is not always time efficient, and a further two that they get "frustrated with waiting". A student said that "by the time you have found the exact information you were looking for, printed and studied it you would have read a book" and another "I get more information quicker from newspapers, the Web takes too long and it's hard to find a free computer". Three students,

however, stated that "Internet is quicker and more up to date" and other students commented that "It's easier to access information from a single computer than from the library", "It makes things a bit more interesting", "It can be a bit of a labyrinth but generally it's much more user friendly than a library" and "I do learn a lot".

b) In question two, students were asked "Can you explain your answer with reference to other ways in which you might have covered the same subject matter and whether or not you felt that time spent on the Web was time well spent?" Five students mentioned books, a further three newspapers, one T.V., another one the Resources room at the university and one more that it depends on the topic. One commented that his time "is better spent using newspapers and magazines". Eight students disagreed with that view, saying that they would have looked in newspapers but that takes a long time. A students said that "[to find the information in newspapers] would take 10 times as long to find half the information and (bar the phone bill) it's free" but another two claim that "it's quicker to look at the index in a book". One added that "in a book I don't have to wait for each page to open" but another student found it easier to concentrate using the Internet than by reading a book. "Searching through papers/books may be just as time consuming but at least it's active, I'm not sat powerless in front of a "please wait" screen", said another, but yet another student answered that "looking for books and newspapers is often time consuming, with the Internet you can take the information and work at home" another student replied: "I'm much more likely to read a physical newspaper than on the Net". Two students refuse to see traditional methods go, saying that the Web is only useful as a supplement to books and that it should never be the exclusive resource used.

c) The third question asked the students whether they preferred paper-based resources to the Web. Twenty-three (64%) did and ten (28%) did not. Those in favour of paper-based

resources argued that books are more "academically credible sources", they feel they are using their time "more efficiently" and alluded to the benefits of having an index and that a book can be taken anywhere ("the Web is not always available"). A student worried about "programs crashing and losing information" and another added that she could not find anything on the Internet. Yet another one said that "I waste a lot of time on the Net and I often get distracted and read unrelated pages" and one pointed out that "staring at a screen can be tedious. Often graphics can be distracting". There were some students who saw benefits in both "for information I use the Web, for grammar etc. I prefer books", "it's generally easier to handle paper, although it has less scope", "depends what for - I don't like reading off the screen". Those in favour of the Web argued that "Internet is better for random information", "the Web can be edited so that you end up with only the relevant information", "the Web is more interesting, more variety", "Internet is better for contemporary issues", "the Web is more flexible" and "it is more relaxing and enjoyable to browse through the Web". Those actually against paper-based resources said that "paper is much slower" and "I don't like newspapers at all"

d) The fourth question was "in your opinion what is the best thing about the Web as a language learning tool?". The answers were varied, but many of the participants agreed in a number of replies: variety of information (11), foreign papers available for free (4), up-to-date information (4), finding information (3), World-wide information (2), back issues of papers (2), variety of articles, exercises and texts available in one place (2). Other replies were : "practice reading", "grammar exercises", "dynamic and fun", "incentive", "informative, interesting, lively", "freedom of access" and "quick and easy". A student summarised the general feeling of their perception of the Internet: "I view it as an information source rather than as a language learning tool".

e) The fifth question read: "in your opinion what is the least helpful aspect of the Web in terms of its potential to promote language learning?". Again a very varied range of responses: "length of time waiting/speed" was the most common (6), followed by "not always find the information you're looking for" (2) and "only reading, no listening, writing or speaking" (2). Other drawbacks of the Web were: "most of the pages are in English", hard to use, no interaction, no human feedback, easy to get sidetracked, the time it takes to locate and download material, "there should be more Spanish searchers", "not all people have access to Internet", "they should make a dictionary available", "people don't read online, easier to print", "it's not a grammar book you can read anywhere or at any time", "often articles are translated badly, there are typing errors, the language is not always authentic" and finally "Internet is no substitute for being able to practice your target language".

f) "To what extent do you agree with the following descriptions of the Web?" asked the sixth question and offered the students six descriptions and a number range to choose one from one to five, one being *strongly agree*, two *agree*, three *neutral*, four *disagree* and five *strongly disagree*. The six descriptions were:

- easy to operate: five (14%) strongly agreed and 22 (61%) agreed. Eight (22%) were neutral and only one diagreed.
- enjoyable to use: five strongly agreed and 16 (44%) agreed. Nine (25%) were neutral, four disagreed and two strongly disagreed.
- provides good support for the exercise: four (11%) agreed and 20 (56%) agreed. 12 (33%) were neutral and no-one diagreed.
- helps you learn: five strongly agreed, 18 (50%) agreed, 11 (31%) were neutral and only two disagreed.
- fits well with the rest of the course: eight (22%) strongly agreed, 18 agreed, seven were neutral, and three disagreed.
- well worth the time spent on it: seven (19%) strongly agreed, 18 agreed, ten were neutral, four (11%) diagreed, and another four stronglyt disagreed.

Very few students added further comments, but two of them were very interesting, as they show they have given some thought to the issues regarding their use of the Web: "I initially found the idea of the web very daunting and found it hard to know the best way to find the information I wanted. It takes practice" and "the major flaw with the Internet is that anyone can put anything they want on the Web, so you can never be certain of the validity of the information".

IV   Next, the questionnaire contained the following statement: "The Web is meant to help you improve your knowledge of the Spanish-speaking world and Spanish language." and asked participants to please comment on any improvements they were aware of in:

a) their knowledge of the Spanish-speaking world and Spanish language : the most popular answer was, predictably, "news" with 14 (39%), four mentioned vocabulary, and other answers were "History" (2), "topics for essays" (2), and "Geography". Two students reported improvements in both areas, and one said it "made assignments easier", interestingly, two students said that with the Web they read more articles than they would otherwise.

b) their Spanish language skills: twelve students (33%) mentioned vocabulary and phrases, seven (19%) reading skills, three mentioned that they do grammar exercises, and another that their grammar had improved. One mentioned "understanding different countries' ways of writing" and another "taking note of interesting grammatical structures".

c) their approach to the Spanish-speaking world and Spanish language: six (17%) say that they are more aware of curreent issues, two that they've developed an interest and another two that they understand different cultures better. Three students report that there has been no

change. Two interesting comments are "It doesn't seem as cut off from the British as it did when we didn't have the Web" and "This way I can look at information from other Spanish speaking countries (other than Spain) so my appreciation is broader"

V   The next question was "In what ways could the Web have done more to help you?". There were many different and varied replies. The most popular was "be faster" with 6 replies, followed by "classification" and "more information" with 2 each. They also wanted faster and better-equipped machines (one says that "University computers should be able to reproduce audio and video via the Net"). They also wish the web were "less fiddly", "more self-explanatory", with a wider range of material, more general overviews of topics, more Spanish search engines, and more interactive grammar exercises. One student adds that a dictionary would be useful and another that they wish information was kept in El País for longer than a week (it is now, but there is a charge to access it).

VI   Finally, the last question was "would you want to use it again? Please say why, or why not": 31 replied to this question and all of them replied "yes". The reasons ranged from "to find information" with 19, to "bacause I have to" with 2. Among the other resons mentioned were "Invaluable as a transferable skill" (2), "for non-language related purposes" (2), "to keep up with Spanish speaking world and Spanish language", "if I have the time and patience", "accessible and enjoyable", "Better than newspapers", "Interesting, different, concisely presented information", "an enjoyable way to learn languages and about the country of that language", "Easy and quick way to educate" and "there is no rival for amount and range of information".

4 Conclusion

In the introduction we explained that the main aim of this study was to produce a snapshot of student impressions and abilities with the Web based on the assumption that when we ask students to perform online searches they

   a) know how to perform those searches
   b) like using the web
   c) pay attention to the language

There appear to be two main problems to be encountered with the use of Webpages as a research tool for language learning. One of them is actually finding the resources available. Search engines and language learning interfaces provide a great quantity of URLs, but the suitability of some of those search results is questionable, which is the second main problem. On many occasions the author of the page is not known, and thus the authority of the information and claims their WebPage provides is very relative, as is their spelling, grammar, vocabulary, etc. Students may come across rude materials, incorrect facts and use language and assume it is correct, as it is a "published" work.

A further problem, this time not related to content but to hardware, is speed. Many students will get frustrated by the slow connection and rate of display of pages and information.

The participants' responses paint a picture of experienced Web users for the most part: they are students who use it often, access it from university but also have access at home. They use the Web to obtain information for their Spanish courses as well as others and use email regularly. This picture suggests that they are fairly computer and electronically literate.

The results indicate that the students feel quite confident using the Web and cope well with browsers and hypertext. They do experience problems, but most of the problems are either to

do with the software, hardware, or connection and therefore there is not a lot that can be done other than upgrading equipment.

The majority of the students consider the information easy to find and sufficiently informative, and the reasons for using the Web were mostly currency and convenience.

The section which asked the students' opinion of the web for language learning revealed that the students considered the Web most useful as a convenient information source. Being able to find the information depends largely on whether the information is there to find in the first place and the ability to locate it. The former depends on the essay topic, of course, and the latter is a key part of their electronic literacy.

Overall we may conclude that the Web is liked as a resource, it provides access to authentic materials, which fits with a communicative approach to language learning (the materials are for the most part intended for native speakers of the target language and can be linguistically exploited later) and independent learning, and, as Hare (1998) said: "use of the Web within the curriculum is consistent with thinking in the fields of resource-based learning, distance learning and learning technology" (p. 42). We have also seen that materials are found by the majority without too much difficulty and that most of the learners in this study possessed a good level of electronic literacy which allowed them to make the correct navigation decisions to arrive at the materials they were looking for. Among the main drawbacks are the time it can consume both in locating materials among the many available and because of slow connections, and the inconsistent quality, quantity and type of results, which depend on the subject and knowing how to find the information. Another problem is the fact that audio and video materials are not fully exploited. It is our impression that these drawbacks and problems

could be resolved with improved equipment and connections, and with adequate training to provide skills and to promote good use of the Web, as we shall argue below.

Are students aware that they are involved in a language learning activity when using the World Wide Web? Some of the students make notes of new expressions, vocabulary or grammar, but of those most do it after printing. There seems to be an awareness of the fact that what they are doing is part of their language course, but this is probably perceived in the same way as a trip to the library to collect information: it does not signify they are aware of the language learning processes involved. The fact that they may or may not be perceiving the task as a language learning task is not a fundamental drawback, as the main basis for the use of the Web as a resource is the fact that the students are accessing the target language and interacting with it, and our study aimed to find out not whether they like the online language learning tasks the students are asked to complete by their tutors, but whether they like the tool for that purpose, which the evidence suggests they do.

What are the implications for training? The results from the study show that most of the participants manage to obtain the information they need to complete their tasks. This could suggest that training is therefore not a priority. However, this is perhaps too simplistic a view. There is a need for training. And this training should be part of their curriculum. Developing their electronic literacy is part of the transferable skills they should already bring in to university from school, or at least be developed while they are at university. The training should consist of the necessary navigation skills to enable them to find available information quickly and to ascertain whether the information they are looking for is available at all. This should include, among other practices, using concise and appropriate search terms, (and in the case of language learning in the target language) using reliable sources through previously

tried and tested links and search engines, knowing what to look for in a page, the ability to establish quickly whether a page is worth reading or not, discerning which links to follow, etc. (Warschauer 1999b). In relation to their attitudes towards the Web, it should be stressed in training what the Web can and cannot do, so as to avoid the image of the Web as a source for everything and anything, and learning to access the appropriate tool (be it paper-based, audio, video, CD-Rom, or the Web) for the appropriate material. Moreover, it should teach users to exploit not only the text-based sources online but, for example, chat, audio and video resources.

Based on this conclusion that the WWW is a valuable research tool which provides students with the opportunity to access authentic language, the issue of its integration into the curriculum must be discussed: use of the Web is not institutionalised as a means to deliver language material, it still depends on the individual lecturer or tutor to find the appropriate materials and to promote Web-enhanced language learning. The results of the study present evidence of clear differences in ability and exposure to the Web in particular and computers in general. If we are to arrive at an equal level of achievement, this should change.

There is a need for further descriptive work. This study could serve as a model to modify extensively in research for students' abilities and attitudes towards the Web as a resource. The answers given by the participants in this study have been used to create a close questionnnarie, taking the most popular answers and offering them as choices, which will provide more reliable data for statistical analysis.

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