Authentic Materials

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For an introductory "Authentic Materials" column, I thought it might be appropriate to take stock of the concept of authenticity in language learning technology. It is a widely-held belief that one of the greatest powers of technology *vis-à-vis* language and culture instruction is the rapid, universal delivery of authentic, up-to-date materials. The question remains: "What authentic materials are we delivering and how are we delivering them?"

In the first half of this column, I will provide an overview of some of the types of authentic materials available. In the second half, I will outline some key issues surrounding these materials for language technologists and language faculty. In subsequent columns, I will focus on individual typologies of authentic materials including text, video, audio, static images, and software.

Authentic Materials in the Digital Age

For most people, the Internet has been the most influential technology associated with authentic materials. Despite the current focus on dynamic media such as images, video, and audio, the most visible and widely-used authentic material since the beginnings of the Internet has been the written word. Now rendered into binary form, newspapers, classical literary texts, e-mail, and even online shopping fulfill the basic definition of authenticity in a language learning context: it comes from 'there' and is written by 'them'. (Insert your language / culture of choice) In the digital age, however, the time it takes to transfer these materials is greatly reduced and in many cases, the cost does not extend beyond the hardware and software required to receive and transmit the 'words'.

Perhaps it may not seem necessary to so explicitly describe why text is an authentic material, but the same issues surrounding text will transfer to other forms of media. As language technologists and librarians well know, the Internet did not mark the advent of authentic materials in our language centers. Phonographs, LP's, magnetic tape, posters,

newspapers, videos, laser discs, and DVD's all provide the instructor and learner with these authentic materials. It is the digital coming-of-age with high speed networks that is so promising to many technologists and instructors. We dream that one day any or all texts, images, videos and audio files will be instantly transported to us. They will be authentic, up to date, of high quality, and hopefully free of charge.

Elements of this rosy future are already present. Literary texts have been offered for some time. The original collection is the aptly named Project Gutenberg. (*http://www.gutenberg.net)*) Streaming audio is often included by many news organizations and audio CDs for literature and culture are now widely available for purchase. Elements of visual culture which aid language learning have recently increased in quality. This allows instructors to provide a more dynamic learning experience. Collections of these authentic media are being constructed by several institutions. Two good examples of digital media collections that span several languages and provide license-free media to the language learning community are the San Diego State University *Digital Media Archive* (DMA) (*http://larcdma.sdsu.edu/*) and the *Realia Project*(*http://www.realiproject.org/*).

The goals of both of these projects are similar:

DMA: "*The goal of the DMA is to create seamless national access to authentic materials for teaching and learning foreign languages via the Internet.*"

Realia Project: "*The goal of the REALIA Project is to develop and implement a searchable digitized media database which will provide instructors of modern languages with teaching resources accessible via the Web*"

Both sites have pedagogy and usability in mind by providing usage guidelines for their media, backed up with a database interface that allows for logical searching based on specific learning outcomes. The main difference for now lies in their focus. The DMA provides a limited number of videos for a wider range of languages. The Realia Project concentrates on providing a large number of images and cultural descriptions. Both databases are poised to offer much more in the future.

Single language databases also provide a wealth of authentic media to the language learning community. The Culturally

Authentic Pictorial Lexicon (CAPL) for German provides almost 1,500 license free images (*http://www.washjeff.edu/capl/*). Composed as a dictionary, each photograph represents a German noun and is taken within a German speaking country.

Other databases tangentially offer digital media. The Language Materials Project from UCLA is designed for less commonly taught languages and offers a variety of media on one site (*http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/index.aspx*).

In contrast to specific sites created for language learning, certain libraries are distributing media collections as a part of their mission. The Ohiolink Digital Media Collection, for example, includes videos for foreign language learning (*http://dmc.ohiolink.edu/*).

Most of the collections mentioned here provide raw materials. For language instructors, this is the beginning of the work. The clips must be didacticized, adapted, and distributed in some way to fit their specific curriculum. Examples of how these media can be didacticized and used (in the case of the Ohiolink materials) are available through Dennison University's German department; *http://www.denison.edu/modlangs/german/*

While the learning outcomes may differ from individual curricula, pre-didacticized authentic media abound with contextualized learning scenarios, vocabulary lists, and quizzes to asses learning. The BBC has a popular elementary online course for several European languages which uses audio, video, text, and images in a variety of ways. (*http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/*)

Different media archives and projects also take different approaches. The Five Colleges Consortium provides an introduction to languages by the country in which they are spoken. This includes various dialects of French, Spanish and Swahili. *http://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu/lm_collection.html*. This project retains a higher level of authenticity due to regional differences and colloquialisms that are retained in the media.

Practical Issues in Authentic Material Use

Large-scale projects like the aforementioned sites may not be feasible at most institutions, leaving many to wish to use and distribute materials that they did not develop. Language technologists will often define this as a key issue. What may we legally use, produce, distribute, and who may access it? Some language instructors and the occasional technologist simply ignore this complex issue, but as the music industry presses for clearer usage rules and hammers out legal agreements with institutions of higher education(Young 2004), the legalities surrounding dissemination of authentic materials are likely to take a more prominent role.

The clear alternative to open-source projects such as CAPL and the Realia Project is a commercial venture like CORBIS (*http://pro.corbis.com/*). Despite having an "Education Program" with 450,000 digital images and 570 video clips for educational institutions, CORBIS is in the business of charging for each specific type of use of digital media. Reading their use guidelines is recommended for an eye-opening introduction to commercial media licensing (*http://pro.corbis.com/creative/terms/*).

I would like to nevertheless argue that licensing should not be the most pressing issue for digital media, but authenticity itself and how the authentic materials are used. It may be complex to figure out which media we may use and how they may be distributed, but we simply cannot substitute authenticity for the ease of a clipart-based world. As I outlined in a recent issue of *ReCALL* (Shaughnessy 2004), commercial language learning projects tend to represent culture generically. The fact that most instructors have access to the Microsoft Clipart database (*http://office.microsoft.com/clipart/*) is reflected in too many websites. To see the limitations of how your language is represented (or not represented), visit the site and type in your language into the search field. For more crass examples of cultural representation try (*http://www.clipart.com/*).

Even the commercial CORBIS site (a Microsoft venture) provides watered-down collections for a lower price. There must be a difference between simply having some media and accessing authentic media. The finer points should be hammered out through a discussion among educational technologists and faculty members as to what is needed, which publishers will allow re-distribution of their media, and how to self-publish and distribute dynamic authentic

media. Ventures like DMA and the Realia Project show that collaboration among technologists and faculty is not only possible, but already in the works. Even without such ambitious projects that find, organize and disseminate media, search technologies like *http://images.google.com/* and *http://www.singingfish.com/* provide do-it-yourself ways to retrieve authentic media.

In subsequent columns I will refine and expand this discussion with specific examples from various forms of digital media. I hope to provide links to sources for authentic materials, encourage dialogue about how these materials are used, and analyze the sources of the materials. I therefore solicit and welcome comments, tips, and anecdotes about your experiences with collecting, distributing, and using authentic materials as a part of language learning technology.◆

Works Consulted

Shaughnessy, Michael. CALL, commercialism, and culture: Inherent software design conflicts and their results. 15.2 (2003): 251-268.

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