REVIEWS

Carl S. Blyth. *Untangling the Web: St. Martin's Guide to Language and Culture on the Internet.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. 150p.

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It is momentous when a new medium becomes recognized as an acceptable tool for fostering foreign language (FL) acquisition. Such was the case in the 1980s with the creation of videocassettes, which allowed for the effortless incorporation of television and cinematic productions into FL classrooms (Garza). The World Wide Web (WWW) is the latest medium to attract the attention of foreign-language pedagogues. Yet, the incorporation of the web into the FL classroom will not be as seamless as video has been, as the employment of the technology itself (i.e., the effective use of relevant software and hardware) requires more effort than did a VCR. Still, the WWW holds great potential for our learners who want to become "legitimate participants" in the target culture, allowing them to negotiate for meaning in authentic contexts rather than merely observing the FL in use (Zhao). Carl S. Blyth's *Untangling the Web* attempts to tear down the technological barriers separating students from the cultural and linguistic experiences offered by this newest of media.

Professor Blyth's book, which purports to be a "guide to the Internet as a sophisticated tool to learn a new language and culture" (ix), undertakes three goals: 1) to introduce students to the FL resources on the web; 2) to help learners to search for FL sources and culturally authentic materials and interactive experiences; 3) to show students how to use these resources to foster their own language acquisition. While the text superbly achieves the first two of these goals, it insufficiently prepares students to optimize their learning experiences once they reach a given FL site.

The text consists of five chapters and three appendices. The first two chapters, "Understanding Internet Basics" and "Learning to Surf," provide thorough introductions to the software solutions available to learners for exploring the WWW. Blyth establishes an extremely engaging structure and tone in which he dialogues with rather than lecturing at the student; the author addresses the reader directly and utilizes a Socratic, question-answer approach to outline important and new concepts. In an introduction to concepts such as hyperlinks, browsers, and the

purpose of URLs (those ubiquitous "www.mysite.com" web addresses we find in advertising and receive from information providers), the author prompts the reader to explore web sites that contain FL and cultural information valuable to both the elementary and the advanced student. Explanations of how to use simple technologies like "Back" and "Forward" buttons in the Netscape Navigator web browser as well as its "scroll bars" evince the author's unpretentious approach. This chapter nonetheless prompts the reader to attempt decidedly sophisticated procedures such saving to the hard disk a web page's contents (both text and graphics) and parsing complex URLs such as "http://www.kantei.go.jp/index-e.html" — providing even the experienced surfer with powerful strategies for maximizing his or her use of the web's content.

The third chapter, "Searching the Foreign Language Web," introduces the major search engines (e.g., Yahoo, Lycos) and it reveals how these resources can provide access to a plethora of sites directed at both the FL learner and the native speaker. Blyth recognizes that these search engines can yield an overwhelming amount of resources, and so he details strategies for increasing one's precision in any given inquiry. In an indirect fashion, the author also teaches the learner how to use the web as an encyclopedia of sorts, showing the reader how to find sites on the Catalan language, history and culture and "La Loi de Toubon" (i.e., French language law). Yet, Blyth's inductive approach here will probably allow only the most sophisticated of readers to glean more generalizable search strategies from this chapter; a more exhaustive overview of the linguistic factors that lead to effective searches (e.g., What major semantic fields are indexed in search engines? How might students limit searches by considering the morphological features of terms used on searches, such as the effects of plural nouns, (un)conjugated verbs, and derivational suffixes like *-tion*?) would have made this chapter a fruitful read for an even broader audience.

The fourth chapter, "Communicating Online in the Foreign Language," provides the reader with a useful introduction to the web's various asynchronous modes of communication (i.e., where interlocutors negotiate for meaning over extended expanses of time). Detailed accounts of well-known software solutions such as email, mailing lists and Usenet groups await the reader here. And, while it is unclear why the text devotes so much press to describing the basics of email (information that is already available to students from a number of sources), this chapter in conjunction with the appendices directs learners to a number of sites where they could procure a FL pen pal, subscribe to a mailing list (e.g., 9NOV89-L, a list devoted to the discussion of contemporary German politics and culture), and participate in a FL chat room.

The final chapter, "Sampling Online Foreign Language Resources," reveals that the web avails references such as bilingual dictionaries, grammar and vocabulary lessons, pronunciation guides, verb conjugators, and even (for the most advanced language student) FL corpora. Yet, much of this chapter's information is better suited for one of the text's appendices since it describes many language-specific sites of interest. Furthermore, the short-lived and ever-evolving nature of FL resources on the web suggests that this chapter might better have served its audience by outlining a broad range of strategies for identifying new bibliographies and reference materials.

All in all, *Untangling the Web* does marvelous job of introducing students to FL resources on the web and of helping them secure authentic interactive experiences in this new medium. The text does not, however, prescribe strategies for converting the overwhelming amount of data that a web-based, FL experience offers into a learning experience. This is surprising given that one of the most important changes to FL pedagogy in the last fifteen years has been the incorporation of learning strategies into the design of student activities. For instance, students today are not merely presented with authentic reading passages in the FL classroom; instead, these passages are preceded by pre-reading activities that outline the importance of the use of strategies such as skimming and scanning and how to guess the meaning of new terms based on surrounding context (cf. Oxford). With these strategies, students make their expectations more realistic and they learn to tolerate the seemingly ambiguous nature of authentic input. *Untangling the Web* is not informed by this trend, and so while this text is an excellent source for getting students to Internet sites containing authentic linguistic and cultural experiences, our surfers might be overwhelmed by what they find once they arrive at their destination. ❅

Works Cited

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