

# Accessible authenticity: using Internet resources with school foreign language learners in difficulty

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**Biodata:** David Wilson teaches French, German and students with special educational needs at Harton School in England. His research, presentations and publications cover CALL, learning difficulties and applying authentic texts.

**Abstract:** The National Curriculum for England and Wales now entitles all 11- to 16-year-olds in mainstream schools, including those with special educational needs, to study a modern foreign language. The 1990s have seen the genesis of a number of projects dedicated to the extension of school foreign language learning across the ability range via appropriate use of information technologies and other strategies.

This paper describes the latest phase in the author's school-based initiative supporting foreign language learners with difficulties and investigating the classroom exploitation of electronic resources originally developed for mother-tongue computer usage in countries where the target language is the medium of discourse. Having successfully trialed on-line and on-disc travel software in French, German and Spanish with 13-year-old lower achievers, the author's project now focuses on the ability of the Internet to deliver other curricular topics (School, Daily Routine, Weather, Health, Arranging Meetings and Holidays) to such learners and to contribute to their reading development, vocabulary knowledge and cultural awareness. The author has extensively searched the World Wide Web, identified a range of relevant authentic texts commensurate with the level, interest and ability of the learners and devised accompanying target-language tasks, which he has successfully deployed in school examinations.

*The paper addresses an audience interested in the appropriate use of information and communication technologies in inclusive modern foreign language curricula, with particular reference to secondary education.*

## Introduction

The idea of 'entitling' young people with literacy difficulties to spend several years learning another language still generates a modicum of skepticism in the United Kingdom. Some British modern foreign languages (MFL) teachers argue that grammatical concepts and other 'hard' components of MFL study cannot be postponed for ever. Learners in difficulty, they claim, should at least have the option of dropping one MFL and starting another halfway through their secondary education. Certain Special

Educational Needs (SEN) professionals wonder too whether teaching MFLs to youngsters with learning difficulties is really worthwhile in the light of such students' conceptualizing ability and power of recall. When I conducted a recent MFL/SEN workshop, the special educators' opinions appeared equally divided over the matter.

Nevertheless, although individual teachers may demur, British MFL curricula have indeed grown more inclusive. In the late 1970s, Graded Objectives in Modern Languages (GOML) schemes sprang up everywhere in the United Kingdom. GOML syllabuses and tests based on survival language were devised by local MFL teachers with hypothetical or actual school trips abroad in mind. In the 1980s, 16+ public examinations shifted their emphasis from grammatical knowledge and translation skills to the use of MFLs as vehicles of communication. In the early 1990s, a number of projects successfully piloted MFLs for pupils with learning difficulties (B. Lee (1991); Gelé and Little; Lacey and Wilson).

The 1990s have also seen a rapid expansion in MFL/SEN publications. There is welcome evidence too in the literature that the MFL/SEN agenda is starting to move on to training and organizational issues (B. Lee (1992); Asher and Chambers; Kenning). Now under consideration too are the MFL implications of specific types of learner disability, i.e., emotional and behavioral difficulties (Asher, Heys and West), deafness (Cawthorne) and visual impairment (Couper).

### **SEN, IT and the MFL Curriculum**

The principle that information technology (IT) may broaden the access of pupils with SEN to the National Curriculum (NC) in general, and to the MFL curriculum in particular, is now officially recognized. According to the National Curriculum Council, 'IT offers all pupils, **including those with SEN**,' (my emphases) 'learning opportunities which contribute both to MFL development and to pupils' personal and social development' (National Curriculum Council (1992) F1).

Pilot MFL/SEN projects have paid tribute to 'the successful integration of information technology (IT) in most programs of work among the project partners' (National Curriculum Council (1993) 4). A review of recent MFL/SEN literature has also revealed widespread classroom deployment of IT.

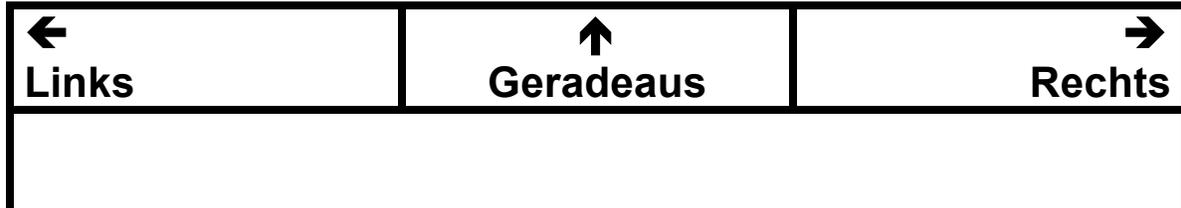
A later policy document acknowledges that certain learners require computers and other technological aids to carry out attainment targets in MFLs. It asserts that all students 'should be given opportunities, where appropriate, to develop and apply their information technology (IT) capability in their study of modern foreign languages' (Department for Education and Welsh Office 1).

### **Accessibility, Authenticity, Appropriateness**

In the late 1980s I scoured two German-language newspapers at my local university library. The weekend editions of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* featured cartoons, advertisements, announcements, weather reports, tables, letters and the like. I had discovered an accessible and inexhaustible source of short authentic texts, each

illustrating a single lexical item, specific notion or grammatical concept in context. Over a three-year period I collected clippings exemplifying 2,000 of the 2,500 words in the public examination prescribed vocabulary list for German.

One of these clippings was a cartoon of a vehicle waiting at a 4-way intersection. An overhead sign read:



I once presented this item to a German class that had received thorough practice in direction-giving vocabulary. The key vocabulary — ‘links,’ ‘geradeaus’ and ‘rechts’ meaning ‘left,’ ‘straight ahead’ and ‘right’ respectively — had been well drilled, yet the cartoon caused a lot of difficulty. Many learners assumed that the three words on the road sign were the names of German towns. The zany, vaguely surreal, culturally unfamiliar humor, which typifies many German cartoons, had raised a barrier to comprehension.

In keeping with the ongoing ‘authenticity’ debate (Breen; Arnold; W. Y. Lee), I propose three criteria for the selection of authentic MFL learning resources:

- **Accessibility:** Material to be convenient for the teacher and intelligible to the learner
- **Authenticity:** Texts and accompanying tasks to be perceived by the teacher and the learner as having a real-life communicative purpose
- **Appropriateness:** Suitability for the topic in hand and both teacher and student must feel a sense of ownership over what is generated during the text-based lesson

These components of MFL materials design are even more crucial when learners with special needs form the target audience.

## **Foreign Language Learners and Special Needs**

Broadly speaking, learners have special needs if there is a mismatch between what they bring to an institution or curriculum and what the institution or curriculum demands of them. Social, economic, medical or psychological conditions may have a deleterious effect on an individual’s performance. Special educators, however, need to consider first the possibility that institutional or curricular factors are contributing to learning difficulties.

Teachers who reflect on their own learning experiences within the educational system may remember instances when they also had special needs. During my English Language Assistantship in a French lycée in the late 1960s, I opted for an advanced French course for foreign students at the local university. I was keen to improve my listening skills and was excited at the prospect of using a language laboratory for the first time. I still wince, however, when I recall the supervisor’s ‘Vous êtes britannique, n’est-ce pas?’ as I subsequently wrestled in my language laboratory booth with pattern drills requiring

thirty-word sentences to be heard and reproduced from memory in the imperfect tense. Later, as a young teacher of MFL in an English school with a language laboratory, I resolved to spare my charges these Herculean ordeals and to set them more appropriate tasks.

A more conventional and manageable definition of special needs at school level is to place within that category children who have significantly greater difficulty in learning than most of their peers of the same age. A Reading Age of 9 is the minimum requirement for coping with the literacy demands of a mainstream secondary school placement at Chronological Age 11. A quarter of my school's intake starts with Reading Ages two or more years below Chronological Ages. Although a tiny minority of these learners subsequently transfer to local special schools, most will remain in mainstream education receiving their full subject entitlement, including one MFL.

### **Special Needs Electronic Resource Projects**

The National Curriculum Council highlighted 'a difference in approach between ordinary and special schools (and) between MFL specialists and specialist teachers of pupils with SEN. The first group begins from the demands of the subject, the second from the individual needs of the particular pupil. Successful language learning for all pupils with SEN requires skillful and sensitive combination of these' (National Curriculum Council (1993) 3).

My point of departure in two previous Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) projects was indeed an electronic resource, which I wished to submit to classroom trialing. In both cases, the research focus shifted towards the individual needs of the learner exploiting the resource (Wilson). When I trialed the British Tourist Authority's German viewdatabase *Großbritannien Urlaub* as a classroom resource, I collaborated with a boy exhibiting challenging behavior. He was interested in computers and eager to find a teacher willing to supervise him when he used them after school. We were able to negotiate an agenda that benefited us both.

In a second project, I downloaded several pages from the Swiss city of Lausanne's viewdatabase. I then used them to introduce the French topic of travel to two small groups of 13-year-olds with learning difficulties. The topic was subsequently developed through multimedia software and a classic computer language game. The latter had two playing levels to cater for the wide ability range that existed in both classes, despite the over-representation of SEN registrees. Both groups later completed under examination conditions a writing task closely resembling the language game but incorporating elements from the other software. Fourteen of the sixteen candidates could frame at least one competent target-language response. All learners expressed themselves satisfied with the test's fairness and acknowledged the significant contribution of IT usage to their preparation.

### **The *Internet Francophone* Project**

National public viewdata has a few advantages over the World Wide Web as a source of MFL materials for Anglophone learners, for example:

- It specializes in short texts, often abbreviated further with graphics, its 24-row and 40-column display averaging 500 characters, while a book or web page may contain eight times as many.
- Its national language is typically its sole medium, French for *Télétext*, German for *Bildschirmtext* and Spanish for *Ibertex*, while English is hard to avoid on the Web. These and other pluses derive from the constraints of viewdata, which also have serious disadvantages, for example:
  - Direct dialing at international telephone rates imposes a heavy burden on cash-strapped schools.
  - Special software is required to screen viewdata pages and at least three different European standards of display are in operation.
  - Viewdata pages are primarily intended for screen display and often require extensive recoloring to be readable on paper.
  - Guest access, widely available in the early 1990s, has become the exception rather than the rule.

According to German as a foreign language specialists Stoye and Pirkkalainen, ‘Arbeiten im Internet — es gibt nichts authentischeres.’ The Internet offers access to the publications not only of governments, organizations and companies but also of individuals. Internet providers vie for the custom of the growing number of families with home PCs while public libraries ensure that those without computers can experience the Internet at little or no cost. In short, the Internet is everywhere, it is impossible to ignore it and it is expanding all the time.

The fact remains, however, at least as far as the United Kingdom is concerned, that the Internet has made few inroads into schools, let alone MFL classrooms. Even computer-literate secondary school MFL teachers are prone to regard on-line media as a library resource for advanced learners and therefore irrelevant to beginners or learners with special needs. For them, the Internet is a solution in search of a problem.

The on-line media initiative that I have dubbed the *Internet Francophone* Project began with a very concrete curricular problem to which the Internet offered a partial solution. In September 1996 I found myself once again teaching two groups of 13-year-old learners of French with special needs. By this stage my school’s MFL department had agreed a topic-based, textbook-independent and National Curriculum-compatible scheme of work to be followed by all teachers within a given year group. The topics of *School Life*, *Daily Routine*, *Travel & Transport*, *Geographical Surroundings*, *Weather*, *Health*, *Arranging a Meeting* and *Holidays* were prescribed for 13-year-old learners of French. These students were invited to tick a ‘can-do’ list of skills at the end of each unit. As contributor to this scheme of work, I was fully committed to a common-objective approach. In my experience, learners with special needs in mainstream schools are very reluctant to follow a curriculum that they perceive as having little ‘surrender value.’ At the same time, what they study also needs to be accessible, authentic and appropriate.

I resolved to write most of my own learning materials for the slow learners in my charge. Fortunately, my school’s MFL department has a tradition of sharing teacher-produced

resources, which reduced the workload. However, what emerged was a dearth of accessible, authentic and appropriate resources for learners with special needs. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was also due to inspect my school over a 5-day period. My response was to access the Internet in search of cross-ability, curriculum-compatible authentic texts.

Using *AltaVista* and other general search engines, I was able to locate an average of two documents for each scheme of work topic. Tasks were devised to accompany these texts. The National Curriculum decrees that MFL assessment should be conducted entirely in the target language: a tall order for low attainers. The prospect of writing target-language rubrics to accompany the tasks was daunting and I resolved to set exercises with the first question already answered as an example. This strategy of dispensing with rubrics altogether and making the task self-explanatory was endorsed by a speaker at a national Modern Languages and Special Educational Needs conference in July 1996 (Elston).

## Resource and Learning Outcomes

Four Internet resources and their accompanying tasks exemplify the resource and learning outcomes of the *Internet Francophone* project:

- **Journal d'Héloïse** at [http://www.nat.fr/roca/heloise\\_doc.htm](http://www.nat.fr/roca/heloise_doc.htm): In this short biography a 7-year-old girl introduces herself, her parents and pets. This text tied in well with the topic of **Daily Routine** and provided a template for learners to create a similar presentation about themselves and their families. The biography was even accessible to beginners, who could all adapt the first two sentences with age and name references from a very early stage. Some could work out what the majority of the text was about and appreciated the authenticity of her liking for the *Lion King* and her amusing choice of cat's names.
- The Ministry of Education of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg publishes a **calendrier des vacances et congés scolaires** (**Vacances scolaires** for short) at [http://www.men.lu/\\_publications/legislation/vacances95.html](http://www.men.lu/_publications/legislation/vacances95.html). A Luxembourg school web site gives similar information at <http://www.restena.lu/lfb/conges.html> as **Congés**. Both texts contributed to the topics of **School Life** and **Holidays**. Although the **Vacances Scolaires** text is long, it is also highly repetitive in the way it lists the nine recesses of the school year. The **Congés** text tabulates some of this information. The first column shows the recess dates in numeric format (e.g., 26.10.97-02.11.97) The second column names the recess (e.g., Toussaint) I asked my learners to complete the same table in which the first-column data had been blanked out. This they were able to do with a little assistance (the first row was done for them). The fact that the information related to recesses in the coming school year led to a few of them completing the dates with the wrong year.
- **Se déplacer à Paris** at <http://www.parisnet.com/french/city/transp.htm> is a menu of 14 clickable hypertext buttons, each naming a mode of transport in Paris (e.g., Taxis, Bateaux, A vélo). The text integrated with the topic of **Travel and Transport**. The task devised to accompany this text was a series of 12 pictures of forms of transport that the learners had to match with the options in the **Se déplacer à Paris** text. The fact that one of the options on the web page was a balloon ride added to the authenticity and interest of this very simple text. This particular exercise was very

well done by my learners with special needs. One 13-year-old boy with a Reading Age of 8 years 9 months had a perfect score.

- **Météo nationale** at <http://www.cmc.ec.gc.ca/cmc/images/Media/Cansysf.gif> is a daily-updated weather map of Canada with symbols and legend. These maps came within the ambit of the topics of **Weather** and **Holidays**. I asked my learners to write French phrases to describe the weather in eight Canadian cities. Most were able to perform this task, some from memory, others by copying from a vocabulary information sheet. The choice of a Canadian weather map as a text reinforced what the learners had studied in Geography lessons. An opportunity also arose to discuss the place of the French language in countries other than France.

## Conclusion

If they are **properly handled**, on-line-media-sourced authentic resources can furnish a suitable basis for the development of the reading skills, vocabulary knowledge and cultural awareness of even low achievers. I wish to emphasize a few points:

- **Accessibility, Authenticity, Appropriateness:** Accessibility means convenience for teachers and intelligibility for learners. Authenticity lies not only in a text's mother-tongue purpose but also in its foreign-language purpose when used by teachers and learners. Appropriateness not only means curriculum compatibility but also a sense of ownership by teachers and learners.
- **Solve curricular problems with electronic resources:** Internet-sourced texts fill gaps in the textbook and the teacher's knowledge and experience. They also add a measure of topicality.
- **Address the needs beyond learners' wants:** Given the chance, many learners with special needs would occupy their time drawing and labeling pictures, with the emphasis on the former. Such learners need to be challenged if they are to make any progress at all.
- **Work smart with Internet resources:** Downloaded pages can be easily integrated into word-processed documents such as worksheets. Some may still require recoloring because they are designed for screen display.
- **Teamwork:** Web searches for accessible, authentic and appropriate resources to meet learners' special needs is labor-intensive, time-consuming, but ultimately highly rewarding. Teaching colleagues will appreciate your efforts if you share the fruits of your toil with them. Who knows — they may even return the favor!

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## **French Language Links Featured in Paper**

**Journal d'Héloïse:** [http://www.nat.fr/roca/heloise\\_doc.htm](http://www.nat.fr/roca/heloise_doc.htm)

**Vacances scolaires:** [http://www.men.lu/\\_publications/legislation/vacances95.html](http://www.men.lu/_publications/legislation/vacances95.html)

**Congés:** <http://www.restena.lu/lfb/conges.html>

**Se déplacer à Paris:** <http://www.parisnet.com/french/city/transp.htm>

**Météo nationale:** <http://www.cmc.ec.gc.ca/cmc/images/Media/Cansysf.gif>

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