

Seth Kershner

# Learning languages on the Web

## Online tools

**T**o anyone who has ever used or heard about Rosetta Stone or Mocha Languages, it is clear how advances in technology have revolutionized language learning. The days of poring over conjugation tables and sifting through flashcards are over. It is now possible for the driven student to chat with native speakers via Skype, or submit their pronunciation of Arabic to collective critique on YouTube; in this way one can become proficient or even fluent in the target language—the language one is learning to speak—without ever setting foot in the country where that language is spoken.

Those who fork over the money for the more sophisticated, fee-based learning tools see them as quite affordable compared to the high cost of college and university language courses. But more affordable still are the free, but lesser known learning tools found on the Web. The following pages contain a selective list of freely available Internet resources for students, scholars, and the general public.

### Getting started

- **BBC Languages.** The British Broadcasting Corporation offers online learning materials on around 40 languages, but much of that material is limited to phrases one might need to use while “on holiday” in Albania or India. The BBC provides far richer fare for six key European languages (French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, and Greek) as well as Mandarin Chinese. For each of these seven languages, you can begin by perusing a guide for the target language, which usually consists of the alphabet, facts about accents or

diacritical marks, and important phrases. For those who have had prior experience with the target language, the BBC provides online proficiency tests aimed at assessing oral, written, and listening abilities. Other features range from personal introductions to sports phrases and street slang (e.g., “Cool Spanish” or “Cool Italian”). Although some video content is available only to residents of the United Kingdom, the rest of the instructional content is freely available to all. *Access:* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/>.

- **Deutsche Welle, Learn German.** Arguably the most systematic approach to offering free language programs on the Web comes by way of Deutsche Welle, Germany’s international broadcaster. Deutsche Interaktiv, a 30-part “interactive online German course is ideal for both beginners and those who have some previous knowledge of German.” More casual learners can choose from getting their “German with the News,” or through an assortment of broadcast-quality videos on subjects relating to the cultures of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Deutsche Welle also offers German Audio Trainer, a program that promises that “in 100 lessons you can effectively learn basic vocabulary and improve your pronunciation.” For learners on the go, 100 lessons of Deutsche Welle’s “Audio Tutor” are also available for downloading through iTunes. *Access:* <http://www.dw.de/learn-german/s-2469>.

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• **Italica: Corso di lingua italiana.** Maintained by the Italian state broadcaster, Rai, this site contains plenty of audio files to stimulate the beginning student of Italian. In addition, thematically organized units provide the sort of needed exposure to real-life situations that build confidence in the beginning learner. Unfortunately this *corso* is marred by a very rudimentary Web design. Compared to what the BBC is doing, Italica lags far behind in its user experience. *Access:* <http://www.italica.rai.it/corso.php>.

• **Miraflones.** Under the “Free Materials” part of this Web site, *libro total* is a portal to dozens of digitized Spanish-language books in the public domain. Users can search these books by author, title, and country of origin; and also enjoy access to open-source dictionaries, if they ever need to look up a difficult word. The interface is a little clunky, but this shouldn’t detract from the site’s usefulness as a supplementary learning tool. *Access:* <http://www.miraflones.org>.

• **Russia Today, Learn Russian.** Yet another state broadcaster providing free educational content is Russia Today (RT). Although the broadcaster has been derided in western media as a mouthpiece of the Kremlin, RT’s Learn Russian Web site is the premier place to find free instruction in the language of Dostoyevsky. Users have to register for an account, after which they can progressively work through the site’s dozens of lessons—designed to move the learner from elementary level (simple greetings and phrases) up through preintermediate (expressions of time, describing someone’s appearance, etc.). The site lacks video content, but has copious amounts of audio files that are especially useful for learning the hard-to-master Cyrillic alphabet. *Access:* <http://learnrussian.rt.com/>.

## Reference tools

• **Like a Spaniard.** For slang and idioms from Spain, the blog “Like a Spaniard” categorizes entries under helpful headings like “Colors” and “Food.” No better place to turn to when you need to find the Spanish equivalent of “to get into a fine pickle.” (It’s

*meterse en un berenjenal*, literally “to get into an eggplant patch.”) *Access:* <http://www.likeaspaniard.com/>.

• **Slangopedia.** After studying the target language for a while, many learners are eager to travel abroad and try out their skills among the natives. It’s best to prepare for such a trip by boning up on slang and other informal uses of the language. For Italian, Slangopedia would be the best bet. Hosted on the Web site of the popular Italian newsweekly, *L’Espresso*, this resource offers around 1,000 detailed entries on slang terms. The entries have been submitted by volunteers and are searchable by their first letter, theme (e.g., politics, school), or even the city where the term originated. *Access:* <http://temi.repubblica.it/espresso-slangopedia/>.

• **Thesuri.** At a certain point as we develop our vocabulary in the target language, we will come to rely less and less on simple dictionaries. Thesauri will become more useful at that point, as they are particularly helpful in allowing us to see interconnections between old and new bits of vocabulary. For students of Spanish, French, or Italian, Web sites like Sinónimos, the Dictionnaire Electronique des Synonymes (produced by the Université de Caen, Basse Normandie), and the Dizionario dei Sinonimi e dei Contrari (an e-thesaurus hosted by Italy’s newspaper of record, *Il Corriere della Sera*), are three ways to use thesauri without spending money or taking up extra shelf space. *Access:* <http://www.sinonimos.com>, <http://www.crisco.unicaen.fr/des/>, and [http://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario\\_sinonimi\\_contrari/](http://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_sinonimi_contrari/).

• **UCLA Language Materials Project, Language Profiles.** The UCLA Department of Linguistics maintains this Web site. While hardly comprehensive (for example, commonly taught foreign languages like Spanish do not get profiled), there are around 100 language profiles to choose from. Each begins with a map showing the primary place where the language is spoken, followed by a summary (written in refreshingly plain prose) discussing the key linguistic features of the language. So, for example, the entry on Ice-

landic tells us—among other things—that it currently has around 280,000 speakers; that it is closely related to other Scandinavian tongues like Norwegian and Danish; and that among its many sounds are 21 consonants, 8 vowels, and 5 diphthongs. *Access:* <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/Profile.aspx?menu=004>.

- **WordReference.com.** More than just free access to numerous dictionaries (mostly Romance languages: Italian, Spanish, French, and Portuguese), this Web site also features a “verb conjugator” for many of the words it defines (helpful for seeing what *hablar* will look like in the future tense). Perhaps the most stimulating and helpful aspect of this site are the word forums, where native speakers and experienced students respond to your questions about grammar and composition in the target language. *Access:* <http://www.wordreference.com>.

### **Broadcasts and podcasts**

- **Amnistía Internacional, Informativo Semanal en audio.** This is weekly podcast is produced by the Spanish chapter of Amnesty International, in alliance with a Madrid-based association of community radio stations. Amnesty International is an international nonprofit advocacy group with a presence in more than 80 countries around the world. Visitors to this site can read a transcript of the podcast as they listen, thus ensuring their exposure to comprehensible input. Learners have yet another way to become used to hearing and understanding Spanish while keeping up with global news and analysis from a human-rights point of view. *Access:* <http://www.es.amnesty.org/noticias/podcast/>.

- **News in Slow Spanish.** In this podcast native speakers discuss the “Weekly News, Spanish grammar, and Spanish expressions, and much more in simplified Spanish at a slow pace so that you can understand almost every word and sentence.” Each installment is considerably longer than the RFI’s equivalent (*Journal en français facile*), but appears less regularly (only once a week). Part of each program is given over to a grammar lesson (intermediate-to-advanced in orientation), and learners will surely benefit from the

variety of voices heard on the show. *Access:* <http://www.newsinslowspanish.com/>.

- **RFI, Learn French Online.** The French broadcaster RFI maintains this web site, which features a number of excellent resources for French students of advanced beginner to intermediate abilities. A number of aural comprehension exercises are available on the site, including some that have learners first listen to segments of news broadcasts and then answer follow-up questions like, “Was the first speaker a reporter or an interviewee? Was she speaking in French or through a translator?” There is also plenty here to help push learners through the plateaus that they inevitably encounter after a period of intensive study. Radio serials with characters based in Francophone Africa and a daily ten-minute news broadcast (*Journal en français facile* or “News in Easy French”) delivered in slow, steady diction are effective ways of keeping learning fun and exciting. *Access:* <http://www.rfi.fr/lfen/statiques/accueil.asp>.

### **TV as teacher**

- **LingusTV.** The motto of this site is “Learn Spanish by watching TV.” LingusTV recently broke into the business of offering Spanish instruction to foreigners visiting Spain, but it started out as a site offering free videos. Thankfully, that offering remains, and the videos are broken down into three levels of difficulty: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. They are fun to watch and have plenty of funny (even bawdy) bits. Learners have the option of watching the videos, which last around three minutes each, with English subtitles turned on or off. *Access:* <http://lingus.tv>.

- **WebTV.** Hosted by the Web site of *Clarín*, Argentina’s main newspaper, WebTV offers free streaming video covering current events, sports, and celebrity. In order to replicate the immersive experience of being in a foreign land, language learners need to find creative ways of always surrounding themselves with the sounds of the target language. When the goal is not necessarily listening for total comprehension, but rather just hearing the sounds of Spanish, having one

of WebTV's programs on in the background during housework is just the ticket. *Access:* <http://www.clarin.com/webtv/>.

## Less commonly taught languages (LCTLs)

- **Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA).** The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota is "one of the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI National Language Resource Centers, whose role is to improve the nation's capacity to teach and learn foreign languages." The Web site for CARLA is an especially rich source of material for those who want to learn LCTLs (generally understood to be any foreign language other than the Big Three: Spanish, French, and German.) Here users get to find language-specific electronic list information, group-sourced instructional materials, and even a list of contact information for language experts willing to help neophytes. When it comes to the Web site's freely available learning tools on nearly two-dozen tongues, quality varies. For example, Portuguese and Turkish offer little more than a few online exercises and access to an electronic list, while Hebrew and Chinese each boast extensive collections of audio files and other resources. *Access:* <http://www.carla.umn.edu/lctl/materials/mbl.html>.

- **Center for Language Technology and Instructional Enrichment (CeLTIE), Recorded Materials Archive.** Indiana University-Bloomington's (IUB) CeLTIE "aims at providing leadership and technological expertise to support excellence in language teaching, learning, and research." While many of the audio files online at their Recorded Materials Archive are password-protected and available only to the IUB community, there's quite a bit of freely available material that will be useful to the beginning, intermediate, or even advanced students. The free content draws on a mix of Foreign Service Institute Language Course material, as well as hard-to-find instructional material in LCTLs like Modern Greek and Classical Hebrew. *Access:* <http://www.iu.edu/~celtie/catalog1.html>.

- **FSI Language Courses.** This non-governmental site allows users to find and download old Foreign Service Institute training materials, including entire texts and (wherever possible) their accompanying audio cassette tapes. The materials are in the public domain, and cover more than 40 languages (among them LCTLs like Korean, Arabic, Hausa, and Vietnamese). *Access:* <http://fsi-language-courses.org/>.

- **Thai-language.com.** Online for well over a decade, this Web site is essentially a one-stop shop with "13,826 audio clips, over 55,349 dictionary entries, 826 images and illustrations, message boards, and a fun world-wide community of folks who are interested in Thai language, culture, residency, and travel." As an added bonus, visitors to site can even read and listen to the fairly extensive Thai training materials used decades ago by the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. State Department (which are now in the public domain). *Access:* <http://www.thai-language.com/>. *~*

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*("Faculty reconnect" cont. from page 82)*

question of how to find ways to keep faculty aware of the ongoing innovations that are a hallmark of academic libraries. It gives faculty a fresh look at library instructional programs and research services available to support their classroom and professional development needs.

By adding this resource to the library outreach toolkit, the library program has opened additional avenues for instructor feedback and increased the opportunity to foster collaboration.

## Notes

1. FacPack screenshot ideas, <http://libguides.santarosa.edu/facpack>.

2. Christine Tawatao, with Rachel Hungerford, Lauren Ray, and Jennifer L. Ward, "LibGuides Usability Testing: Customizing a Product to Work for Your Users," *Proceedings of the 2010 Library Assessment Conference Proceedings: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment* in Baltimore, October 24–27, 2010. *~*