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Intercultural Usability of Language Learning Websites

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Abstract

Website usability can be defined as the ease of use of websites. General usability, pedagogical usability, technical usability and intercultural usability can be considered and examined for the understanding of the usability of language learning websites, which requires a discipline-specific approach. In the field of computer-assisted language learning, usability issues have been addressed mainly in terms of evaluation criteria and have been commonly discussed in relation to user expectations and user experiences. In spite of a growing interest in intercultural language learning, however, little research on intercultural usability of language learning websites has been published yet. There is a need to answer the question of how language learning websites integrate the target language and culture for the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence. This article explores intercultural aspects of language learning websites and presents usability guidelines for designing intercultural language learning websites.

Keywords: Intercultural language learning, website usability, language learning websites, computer-assisted language learning

Introduction

The importance of culture in second/foreign language learning has been highlighted by a number of researchers (e.g., Genc & Bada, 2005; Kramsch, 1993; Liaw, 2006; Tang, 2006; Thanasoulas, 2001). In the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), culturally responsive teaching is discussed as an essential element in CALL practice (Brander, 2005) and intercultural communication is considered as a major topic in CALL research (Chun, 2007; Son, 2011). While providing a variety of language learning materials, exercises, activities or resources, most language learning websites normally present cultural information on their target languages. However, the cultural information is often seen as merely a supplementary material and is not properly utilised to facilitate user interactions through the websites. If language learning websites do not reflect cultural aspects of second/foreign language learning and do not provide learners with cultural experiences, they could be simply regarded as a resource depository. This article addresses the issue of how language learning websites can integrate the target language and culture for the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence. It looks at intercultural aspects of language learning websites and proposes guidelines for designing intercultural language learning websites.

Culture in User Interaction and Interface Design

User interactions are facilitated by interface design (Clemmensen, Hertzum, Hornbæk, Shi, & Yammiyavar, 2009). Garrett (2003) claims that interface design, which often refers to the overall look and feel of a website, is theoretically the design of interface elements that facilitate user interactions. In a study on cross-cultural website design, specifically, Dong and Lee (2008) argue that web user interaction design and interface design deal with creating and optimising cultural preferences in order to increase its usability. With a focus on cultural aspects of interaction design, Sato and Chen (2008) also say that different cultures produce different user interaction and interface design and different cultures can be distinguished by specific user groups' mental models, behavioural patterns, emotional responses, aesthetics, rules, norms and values. In this sense, interaction design shapes users' cultural experience while interface design visualises interactions.

Along with the emergence of globally available systems and the increasing use of localised websites, culturally diverse users develop and use a variety of web-based applications (Clemmensen et al., 2009). The cultural appropriateness of interaction and interface design directly influences user perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness and user acceptance of websites (Vatrapu & Pérez-Quiñones, 2006). Marcus (2001) states that cross-cultural user interface design refers to cultural dimensions embedded in interface design to the extent that users' thinking, acting and feeling are deeply influenced by cultural characteristics. His components of user interface include metaphors, mental models, navigation, interaction and appearance. Jagne and Smith-Atakan (2006), from a different angle, propose that cross-cultural issues have to be resolved by practitioners in the process of website development. This point suggests that cross-cultural user interface design for the integration of language and culture should be initiated by the understanding and analysis of website development in collaboration with practitioners.

Intercultural Language Learning and Language Learning Websites

Language, culture and learning are interrelated (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Fantini, 1997; Genc & Bada, 2005; Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003). Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein and Colby (1999) define culture learning as "the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures" (p. 50). Based on this definition, Liddicoat et al. (2003) make a link with language education and say, "Intercultural language learning involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to an additional language and culture" (p. 46). This implies that foreign language learners need to gain an understanding of both their own culture and target culture. In this respect, Liaw (2006) also asserts that the learning of culture is "not merely learning the target culture, but gaining insights into how the culture of the target language interacts with one's own cultural experience" (p. 50).

Risager (2011) reviews cultural studies in language learning and teaching and categories cultural dimensions largely into the content dimension, learner dimension and context dimension. She contends that, among the three dimensions, the learner dimension is directly related to intercultural learning and competence. In this approach, then, it can be argued that the learner plays a fundamental role in intercultural language learning, which requires meaningful communication and dynamic interaction. Liddicoat et al. (2003) point out that

there is a need for learning materials “which allow teachers to use cultural information to develop an awareness of communicative practices and which facilitate communication in the target language as well as the development of intercultural sensitivity” (p. 99). For the development of the learning materials, information and communication technology (ICT) can be a rich source and a useful tool. In various ways, intercultural language learning activities can be well supported by the use of ICTs such as web searching, emailing, video conferencing and social networking (Dellit, 2005). Language learning websites, containing language learning activities and exercises, can be considered as another type of educational ICTs.

The understanding of intercultural language learning is vital to the design of intercultural language learning websites. The question of what intercultural language learning websites should have and offer can be answered by looking at what intercultural language learning should be and how it can occur. According to Liddicoat et al. (2003), intercultural language learning is based on five principles: active construction, making connections, social interaction, reflection and responsibility. These principles provide practical suggestions for designing and evaluating intercultural language learning websites when they are linked with user interaction and interface. Table 1 shows the suggestions in relation to the principles of intercultural language learning.

Table 1

Principles for intercultural language learning (Liddicoat et al., 2003, pp. 47-51) and suggestions for intercultural language learning websites

General principle	Application in language learning	Suggestions for language learning websites
<p>1. Active Construction</p> <p>Learning involves the purposeful and active construction of knowledge within a socio-cultural context of use.</p>	<p>Exploring language and culture through active engagement.</p> <p>Developing a personal, intercultural space with multiple dimensions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have specific intercultural learning goals. • Provide a range of interactive tasks. • Provide a variety of resources (e.g., texts, graphics, audios, videos).
<p>2. Making Connections</p> <p>Learning is based on previous knowledge and requires challenges to initial conceptions that learners bring. The challenges lead to new insights through which learners make connections, to reorganise and extend their existing frameworks of knowledge.</p>	<p>Comparing languages and cultures and drawing connections and building the relevant bridges between home and target language and culture.</p> <p>Comparing existing knowledge of language and culture against new input.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make use of authentic materials. • Build connections across texts and contexts. • Present linguistic and cultural information. • Present real language samples. • Provide communicative practices in the target language. • Include examples of cross-cultural differences (e.g., directness, politeness). • Stimulate learner interest in the target language and culture.
<p>3. Social interaction</p> <p>Learning is social and interactive.</p>	<p>Communicating across linguistic and cultural boundaries and recognising them as boundaries and why they are constructed.</p> <p>Communicating about linguistic and cultural difference and similarity.</p> <p>Engaging with new conceptual systems through language.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage users to communicate and collaborate with other users. • Motivate learners to engage in interactive discussions. • Guide learners to take responsibility for their own intercultural learning.
<p>4. Reflection</p> <p>Learning involves becoming aware of the processes underlying thinking, knowing, and learning through conscious awareness and reflection.</p>	<p>Reflecting critically and constructively on linguistic and cultural differences and similarities, and questioning dichotomies.</p> <p>Reflecting critically and constructively on their own intercultural behaviour.</p> <p>Articulating the multiple dimensions of their own intercultural space and identity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide learners to share their ideas and resources. • Promote reflection on language, culture and learning. • Promote social involvement. • Provide practical feedback on learning. • Support self-assessment of intercultural learning.
<p>5. Responsibility</p> <p>Learning depends on learners' attitudes and disposition towards learning.</p>	<p>Accepting responsibility for contributing to successful communication across languages and cultures.</p> <p>Accepting responsibility for developing an intercultural perspective.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide suitable tools for intercultural learning. • Avoid biased and offensive language and images.

Usability of Language Learning Websites

Website usability can be defined as the ease of use of websites. In discussing the usability of language learning websites, as shown in Figure 1, general usability, pedagogical usability, technical usability and intercultural usability can be considered and examined. They are interrelated and supportive to each other. General usability refers to the ease of general web use and widely covers non-specific aspects of websites. Pedagogical usability and technical usability look at pedagogical aspects and technical aspects of websites respectively. Intercultural usability, on the other hand, explores intercultural aspects of language learning websites to assess their values in language learning.

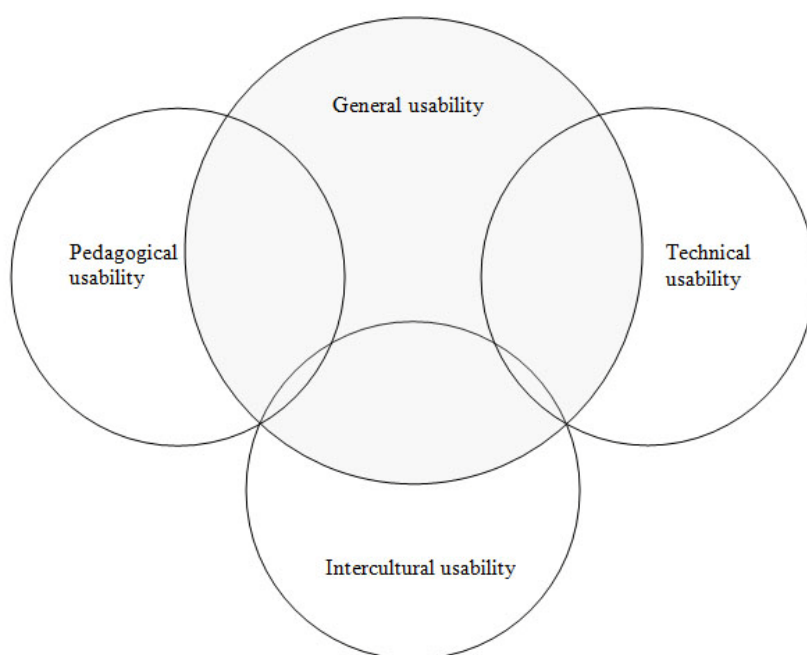


Figure 1. Usability considerations for language learning websites.

In CALL, usability issues have been addressed mainly in terms of evaluation criteria (e.g., Son, 2005; Yang & Chan, 2008) and have been commonly discussed in relation to user expectations and user experiences (e.g., Felix, 2002; Hémarid & Cushion, 2001; Liu, Traphagan, Huh, Koh, Choi, & McGregor, 2008). The term ‘usability’ has been directly used only in a few studies. Through a literature review of usability, for example, Shield and Kukulska-Hulme (2006) propose a discipline-specific approach to the usability of language learning websites with three elements of a research agenda: pedagogical usability, intercultural usability and website evaluation. They emphasise the importance of pedagogical usability and argue that “if the learning and teaching resources supplied by an educational website are not presented and sequenced in a pedagogically-focused manner, the learner is less likely to succeed in achieving the specified learning outcomes of the course” (p. 355). They also assert that intercultural aspects of language learning website usability have been under-researched although “the primary aim of language learning websites must be to promote the acquisition of the target language and culture” (pp. 366-367). In a similar vein, Lim and Lee (2007) also stress the importance of pedagogical usability and propose a

pedagogical usability checklist for ESL/EFL websites. Their checklist items are explained in terms of instruction, contents, tasks, learner variables, interactions and evaluations. However, they do not mention intercultural usability in their study. In the discussion of contents of websites, instead, they simply state, “Target culture should be included (adequate cultural representation)” (p. 73). Stevenson and Liu (2010), on the other hand, explore the use of social networking elements of three foreign language learning websites (i.e., Palabea, Babel and Live Mocha) and report that pedagogical usability and technical usability affect the return of users to the websites. These studies suggest that usability-related issues such as the relationship among the general usability, pedagogical usability, technical usability and intercultural usability need to be researched further in order to improve learners’ experience and maximise the learning of the target language and culture.

Guidelines for Designing Intercultural Language Learning Websites

The suggestions for intercultural language learning websites listed in Table 1 can be considered as key elements that need to be taken into account when designing intercultural language learning websites. With regard to the first requirement for having specific goals, for example, intercultural language learning websites should have goals of being educational places where users can find online materials and resources for learners and teachers of the target language; collaborate with other learners, teachers and/or researchers; engage in discussions on the target language and culture; and/or contribute to the development of the learning and teaching of the target language and culture (Son, 2010). To achieve those goals, it is necessary for intercultural language learning websites to provide a range of interactive tasks, which assist second/foreign language learning and culture learning. In order to produce certain learning outcomes, web resources can be exploited and language tasks such as communication activities, information collections and problem-solving projects can be employed in creative ways (Son, 2007). Also, intercultural language learning websites should make effective use of various types of texts, graphics, audios and videos to respond to diverse interests of users. The level of audio quality, the scale of graphics and the quality of video display need to be appropriate for language and culture learning (Son, 2005). In addition, it is important for intercultural language learning websites to offer authentic materials containing authentic cultural information on the target language. Authentic materials can increase language learners’ motivation for learning and be used as good resources for learning real language for real purposes (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Accordingly, intercultural language learning websites should create an online environment where learners can use authentic materials to discuss their own culture and the target culture. They need to present intercultural activities and offer opportunities to participate in an online community of practice and experience community-driven learning. In a practical manner, they are recommended to utilise communication channels for resource sharing and interactive forums and encourage users to develop their intercultural sensitivity and competence.

Table 2 shows a checklist which demonstrates what questions can be asked in the design and evaluation of intercultural language learning websites. The items of the checklist can be modified to allow for variations of complexity of the target language and culture and purposes of websites.

Table 2

Intercultural website usability checklist

1. Does it have specific intercultural learning goals?
2. Does it provide a range of interactive tasks?
3. Does it provide a variety of resources (e.g., texts, graphics, audios, videos)?
4. Does it make use of authentic materials?
5. Does it build connections across texts and contexts?
6. Does it present linguistic and cultural information?
7. Does it present real language samples?
8. Does it provide communicative practices in the target language?
9. Does it include examples of cross-cultural differences (e.g., directness, politeness)?
10. Does it stimulate learner interest in the target language and culture?
11. Does it encourage users to communicate and collaborate with other users?
12. Does it motivate learners to engage in interactive discussions?
13. Does it guide learners to take responsibility for their own intercultural learning?
14. Does it guide learners to share their ideas and resources?
15. Does it promote reflection on language, culture and learning?
16. Does it promote social involvement?
17. Does it provide practical feedback on learning?
18. Does it support self-assessment of intercultural learning?
19. Does it provide suitable tools for intercultural learning?
20. Does it avoid biased and offensive language and images?

Conclusion

There are a large number of language learning websites that provide a variety of language learning materials, exercises, activities or resources. However, many of them do not have an intercultural focus and are limited to the presentation of static information on the target language although cultural dimensions of language learning need to be integrated into language learning websites. Language learning websites are expected to be a cultural input provider and an effective means of interaction. They can make the distribution of language learning materials easier and contribute to the promotion of intercultural language learning. Intercultural language learning websites should be designed and used to encourage learner engagement with website elements, including linguistic and cultural information, resources, forums and language learning exercises, by providing access to authentic target language materials and culturally meaningful online communication activities.

This article has explored intercultural language learning, proposed key elements of intercultural language learning websites and discussed the usability of language learning websites in terms of general usability, pedagogical usability, technical usability and intercultural usability. It has provided suggestions for the integration of culture in the design of language learning websites. Future research needs to promote further discussions on design-related issues such as content design, interaction design, interface design, activity design and instructional design and, more specifically, intercultural usability of language learning websites in relation to second language acquisition, culturally responsive pedagogy, human-computer interaction, computer-mediated communication and web-based language learning.

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