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### Restructuring intermediate language instruction with open and student-curated materials

#### Bio data

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**Robert Godwin-Jones** is Professor of World Languages and International Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. His research is principally in applied linguistics, in the areas of language learning and technology, and intercultural communication. He has published 4 books, multiple articles and book chapters, and writes a regular column for *Language Learning & Technology* on emerging technologies.

#### Abstract

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This paper describes a project featuring student-discovered and curated online L2 learning materials, posted and discussed on class blogs. Select resources are enhanced with joint faculty/student-authored explanatory glosses, notes and exercises, transforming them into interactive online modules, available as OER. The modules are designed to function as "bridging activities" (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) and, together with other open resources, as digital replacements for commercial textbooks. This is a department-wide curricular initiative featuring "participatory action research" (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002) with the goal of enhancing instruction and increasing student motivation. The project reflects the call for better integration of the affordances of informal learning into the language classroom (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

#### Conference paper

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##### Introduction: project background

Cole & Vanderplank (2016) call for "new research [to] investigate projects that involve individualised, out-of-classroom use or 'forays' in which learners use language independently out-of-class and then report back on their individual experiences to a group of peers" (41). This suggestion mirrors other calls for the better integration of the affordances of informal language learning into the classroom (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Warner & Chen, 2017). Many language educators will likely agree with the view that "language teaching and learning has hitherto worked with an impoverished view of the world beyond the classroom" (Benson, 2017, p. 139). While many teachers undoubtedly do use Internet-related resources, designing activities around *YouTube* videos, for example, or assigning Webquests, they may not be encouraging students to seek out on their own L2 learning resources on the net. Using a student-centered approach to the integration of online L2 materials has the potential to increase student motivation as well as to contribute to their metacognitive and self-direction skills.

Having students themselves participate in the choice of learning materials, provides personal investment and potentially more language uptake (Oxford et al., 2014). At the

same time, students gain skills in searching and evaluating online language learning resources, an important step towards learner autonomy. Sundqvist & Sylvén (2016) discuss several examples of successful programs in which L2 instruction is based on learner selection of online texts and media. Enabling and encouraging the use of learner-contributed media contributes to the development of evaluation skills and critical literacy, crucial competencies for today's learners and citizens (Warner & Dupuy, 2018). In the process, the classroom can become a place in which "autonomy promoting skills can be learned in a collaborative environment" (Sockett 2014, p. 137).

The benefits of this approach are enhanced by having students share found resources, reflect on their usefulness together, and discuss advantages and disadvantage for language acquisition. This serves to bridge the gap between informal and in-class learning and "offers opportunities to foster indispensable digital literacy skills such as evaluation of resources concerning pertinence and credibility amongst less experienced learners" (Trinder, 2017, p. 410). Sharing found resources can be done in a variety of ways, however it is important to configure and enable that collaborative environment in a way that encourages development of a community of self-empowered and confident learners, with the teacher as facilitator. This moves instruction in the direction of distributed or decentralized control, changing the dynamics of the classroom, as well as the role of the teacher:

Teachers will need to incorporate pedagogical activities and strategies that facilitate sharing knowledge, skills and interests; in other words, they will need to encourage neighbor interactions. Teachers will also have to support redundancy by building on what the learners have in common and encouraging students to work with and learn from each other. A primary role of the teacher will be to provide coherence (Murray & Lamb, 2018, p. 259).

The "neighbor interactions" evoked here can be further expanded by having students post their curated resources online in an open environment such as a blog. The teacher's charge to "provide coherence" echoes Thorne's call for "structured unpredictability" in language learning environments (Little & Thorne, 2017, p. 17), with the structure being provided by the instructor and the online world supplying unpredictability and contextualization.

### **Project description**

This paper describes an action research project which moves intermediate-level language instruction in this direction, namely using student-discovered and curated L2 learning materials, posted and discussed on class blogs. Select curated resources are enhanced with joint faculty–student authored explanatory materials (vocabulary glosses, cultural notes, grammar explanations, self-assessment exercises) and made into interactive online modules, available as OER (open educational resources). They are designed to function as "bridging activities" (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) and, together with other open resources (such as [COERLL](#), [OERCommons](#) or [OpenLearn](#)), as digital replacements for commercial textbooks currently in use (see Godwin-Jones, 2017).

This is a department-wide curricular initiative featuring "participatory action research" (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002) with the goal of enhancing instruction and increasing student motivation. All (seven) languages taught at the university are involved. The project seeks to address a perennial problem across languages in our department, namely the steep drop-off in enrollment in language courses after students complete the four-semester sequence that fulfills the foreign language requirement. This is at a point typically before students have gained a working, functional ability in the target language. Most students do not see the value in pursuing further language study, as they see little practical use for L2 proficiency in their personal, scholastic, or planned professional lives. They often have little or no "intent participation", i.e., the intention or vision of actually using what they are learning (Murphey, Chen & Chen, 2005). Envisioning becoming part of a "community in which we might belong and use the information we are learning" (Murphey, Chen & Chen, 2005, p. 98) may provide encouragement towards more meaningful participation in learning. This kind of investment

in learning is often associated with the concept of being part of an "imagined community" (Norton, 2001), one in which the learner is a competent and confident L2 user.

Part of the issue is that standard textbooks used in intermediate language courses do not supply the variety of content needed to address the different disciplinary interests of students enrolled. Texts are often "primarily thought of as vehicles for the learning of vocabulary, grammar, and writing systems" (Warner & Dupuy, 2018, p. 122). When presenting culture, textbooks "have become more and more like tourist brochures" (Kramersch, 2014, p. 308), with glossy photos, stereotypical topics, and quickly outdated information. Since most in-class work tends to be based on textbook materials, that restricts the substantial integration of online materials. The description of the typical English language classroom in Sweden given by Henry & Cliffordson (2017) will probably resonate with many: "Lessons are invariably constructed around commercially produced learning materials, teachers tend to adopt 'one-size-fits-all' approaches, and little use is made of digital technologies" (p. 720). Additionally, textbooks typically do not provide exposure to the evolving array of online genres for reading and writing. As a consequence, students do not develop the knowledge and skills to be informed consumers of L2 online texts. This is particularly problematic at a time in which most of the reading and writing in our students' personal and professional lives will be online (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016).

The project seeks to address these issues through replacement of traditional print textbooks with creation and adaptation of digital learning materials customized to student interest and proficiency levels. Students enrolled in the fourth-semester course are asked to find and curate potential online learning materials based on their own interests, curricular integration, comprehensibility (at CEFR A2/B1 levels) and re-usability (including usage rights). Most instructors have elected to have students conduct three curations over the course of a semester, with the final curation based on content related to their future academic or professional interests or career paths. The intent is to have students find and work with authentic L2 materials of real personal impact, in the process engaging their potential "transportable identities" they are developing as L2 users (Ushioda, 2011).

This affective dimension is enhanced through peer-to-peer collaboration in content selection and curation, adding a valuable social learning component. Curated sources are listed and described (in the target language) in a blog, allowing other students to view, comment on, and rate recommended resources. For some language programs, students were assigned to present one of their curated resources in class in the target language, followed by open discussion in class (in the students' L1) of the resources and their potential usefulness for language learning.

The highest-rated sites curated in the blogs are targeted for development as learning modules, to be used in subsequent cohorts of the course. Continuing the curation-development-deployment cycle on an ongoing basis supplies a regularly updated series of learning materials. While language textbooks try to appeal to young learners with, for example, texts of songs from contemporary pop artists, they are likely to be out of date as soon as published (Lieberman, 2017). Using online sources keeps content current. The modules development is done jointly by instructors and advanced students of the language. The self-contained modules (created with the open source authoring tool [H5P](#)) are interactive, web-based, and shared online. The project is currently being extended to incorporate teletandem partners for each language in the project. Tandem partners in the target languages will be working together (in split L1/L2 sessions) to explore learning materials. Since these are age peers, it is likely that shared generational interests will benefit both the selection and didactization of resources.

### **Preliminary results**

WordPress blog sites were set up for each of the seven languages participating in the project. Each site was cloned from a template set up for the French section. The blogs therefore share a common structure but have been customized to align with each language

program's curriculum. Guidelines are provided to help students get started, as in the following from the German blog:

### What kind of online resource?

To the extent possible, please post resources that...

- Could be usable in an intermediate German class, i.e. not too long, not too difficult, and, in your opinion, of sufficient interest to engage students (see the assessment rubric page)
- Fit in with topics typically covered at this level of German instruction (see categories below)
- Do not appear to violate copyright or fair use requirements, i.e. not clips from sources such as Disney feature films or the like

Students are asked to find resources that reflect topics representing thematic emphases for the course and to tag blog entries accordingly. For German, those topics ranged from advertising to work environments. In addition, students are provided with sample starting points for searching (target language media sites, search engines, children's video collections, the Goethe Institut, etc.), blog writing tips, and assessment rubrics. The latter include resource selection (cultural interest/significance, topic appropriateness, comprehensibility) and resource description (sufficient information, blog entry comprehensibility, language use). The instructor provided feedback on blog entries, both for content and language, inviting students to make revisions. In a student survey in the German class at the end of the semester, all students responded that the "instructions for doing the blog project were clear." In that survey, 83% of the students expressed a relatively positive assessment of the project (50% finding it "fun/interesting/instructive", 33% "so-so", 17% "indifferent" and 0% "I didn't like it").

Students in this initial pilot phase have collected and described resources from a wide variety of online sites. For the German site in Spring, 2017, that included personal blogs, YouTube channels, websites for children, news reports, travel logs, food descriptions, and scientific reports. This reflects the array of academic majors in that class that semester (5 students majoring in political science, 3 in history, 2 in psychology, and one each in engineering, homeland security, international studies, music, and philosophy). The topics ranged from typical German culture-related themes such as Oktoberfest and Beethoven to posts about racism in Germany and housing for immigrant families. The tag cloud (Figure one) shows that the top posts involved video and music. This reflects findings from the use of informal language learning materials, such as Sockett (2014), who found, in his study of learners of English in France, that the most frequently used resources were pop music and videos (TV series and films).



Figure 1: Tag Cloud from the German curation blog

The top-rated posts for German, according to student ratings and comments, illustrate the diversity of topics:

- Sauerkraut (*Deutsche Welle*, video)
- Beethoven (*Deutsche Welle*, text)
- Renewable energy (Podcast)
- Robots in the office (Tech web site)
- News report on theft of gold coin (article in *Der Spiegel*)
- Rap song (Casper — YouTube)
- Satirical song (Alligatoah — YouTube)

The German instructor worked with an advanced student in German during the summer to decide on the most appropriate curated resources to develop as modules. The first choice was a satirical song by Alligatoah, a German hip-hop band. The song, "Du bist schön" (2015 - "You are beautiful") was chosen for several reasons. It was very popular in Germany (20 million views on YouTube) and has significant social and cultural content, especially when considered together with the music video. The song satirizes the cosmetics and fashion industries, referencing the need to buy beauty products (including Botox), wear the latest designer jeans, and to keep slim. The text (and video images) depict Asian textile workers who "can't afford the designer jackets they make." Along with the topical content, there are a series of references to classical German culture, namely the Grimm fairytales and a well-known poem by Goethe ("Heidenröslein", 1771 - "Heather Rose"). In fact, the singer addresses "Spiegelein im Handy" ("Mirror on my cell phone"), referencing Snow White, while holding a selfie stick. Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty are evoked as well. Some of the cultural references will be familiar to American students, inviting discussion of traditional cultural references/citations in popular culture in Germany (compared to USA). The socially critical elements allow for discussion of contemporary societal issues in USA/Germany, as well as expanding beyond cultural binarity to look at the transnational role of music (especially hip-hop/rap) in social and political contexts. This responds to calls in language instruction to expand beyond national in-group identities to international political consciousness (Dasli & Diaz, 2017).

With some vocabulary help, the text is accessible to students at the A2/B1 levels. The language makes use of constructions highlighted in the module, including informal imperative forms, "da" compounds, and code-switching between German and English. This module was developed as a prototype for the German site. For French, a song equally interesting from cultural and linguistic perspectives was chosen, namely "Je veux" ("I want") from Zaz. That song is satirical in nature as well, criticizing consumerism and self-indulgent displays of wealth. It also uses repeatedly a troublesome construction in French, the "en" particle/preposition. The modules based on the two songs supply glosses and explanatory notes, along with the original lyrics and music videos. They invite learners to reflect on the social messaging inherent in the texts, comparing perspectives offered to content in their own L1. The music videos supply the opportunity to explore multimodal messaging. The intent is to encourage students to explore how language manifests itself in different textual and visual genres and communicative contexts.

Targeted grammatical structures are presented through an inductive and scaffolded process. First, examples are drawn from the songs themselves, then additional examples are supplied, as used in a variety of contexts, taken from authentic sources including corpora. Using a usage-based view of language (Ellis, 2017), the learner is invited to detect patterns and, subsequently, to apply examined constructions in a set of interactive exercises. The HP5 framework allows for creation of a wide variety of self-correcting learning activities and widgets, including drag and drop matching, image hotspots, audio-based exercises, and memory games. Also possible is integration of social media functions such as twitter feeds and chat rooms.

## Conclusion

The curation project strives to respond both to local programmatic and curricular concerns, as well as to the widely expressed need to integrate online resources into instructed language learning: "FL [foreign language] educational systems may need to switch to much more responsive roles, supporting learners' autonomous forays into globalized online spaces and providing spaces in which they can exchange information and experiences" (Benson and Chik, 2010, p. 75). The expectation is that this kind of genre-based multiliteracy approach will contribute to the preparation of students for the literacy practices common today (Elola & Oskoz, 2017).

The project also responds to the ongoing changes in the roles of teachers and learners:

Given the growing abundance of authentic L2 content found online, a teacher's primary role will no longer be to provide linguistic input and corrective feedback but rather to help learners curate their personalized learning experiences. In particular, students will increasingly take on roles once held by teachers. As a consequence, teachers will find themselves increasingly positioned as guides, tutors, and mentors (Blyth, 2017, p. 23).

The teacher plays in particular the role of "mediating students' awareness of the L2 learning affordances offered by the everyday technologies they use" (Ushioda, 2011, p. 207). Creating these connections may help reduce the gulf between L2 learning and life. Additionally, the expectation is that catering to student interest in materials selection will help motivate students to continue their language studies, either in formal settings or informally online.

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