Virtual Language Learning: Finding the Gems Amongst the Pebbles

Review by Jana Harper Makaafi

Brigham Young University–Hawaii

VIRTUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING: FINDING THE GEMS AMONGST THE PEBBLES. Uschi Felix. Language Australia. $35.00

Virtual Language Learning: Finding the Gems Amongst the Pebbles by Uschi Felix of Monash University, Australia, is a 182-page guide to using the internet in language teaching and learning. The book comes with an accompanying CD-Rom that enables readers to access the sites described in the text. It calls itself "an essential guide" for language teachers looking for useful internet resources, language learners who want to improve their skills or learn about a new language, teachers who are interested in creating their own internet courses or materials, and others who want to learn about Web-based language instruction.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part is an introduction to and rationale for using the internet for language learning and teaching. It includes a brief discussion of the major advantages and disadvantages of using the web; specifically addressing language teachers, students, and materials or course developers.

This together with a description of different activities and levels of interaction available on the web, convey some compelling reasons to incorporate web-based activities into language learning environments.

The most valuable part of this book may be the second part, which is a nearly 70-page annotated list of example websites. The list is nicely subdivided into 12 smaller lists, depending on the type of materials found on the site such as materials based on textbooks or magazines, whole courses, interactive grammar exercises, and more. Each smaller list is further divided by language. For example, all the German websites are listed together, then all the French sites, and so on. For those looking for language-specific material, this subdivision helps locate relevant sites more quickly. For those interested in creating their own materials, looking at all the descriptions regardless of the language will prove rewarding. Some of the annotations are quite thorough, whereas others are just a sentence or two. Either way, one can always go to the sites for more information.

The third part of this book is called "Making Sense of the Technology" and is xtremely helpful for those who need a review of or introduction to things such as band-idth, FTPs, Hypertext, Java, the difference between a MUD, a MOO, and a MUSH, and iore. Most of the explanations are surprisingly easy to understand, although they assume)me computer and/or internet experience and are probably not for a complete novice.

The last part of the book is an interesting and useful discussion of reading and writ-ig on the Web in languages other than English, including many European and Asian inguages. This section is the most technical of the book.

In addition, there are four appendices which list even more useful sites. One otable feature of this book is that ESL sites are not the main focus. Most of the sites escribed are for European languages, and the ESL/EFL sites are compiled in an appen-lix. The rationale for this decision is never explicit, but nevertheless, a fairly good list if the top sites (with very brief annotations) is included in the appendix.

Overall, this is a practical, useful book, especially for the annotations of the many lifferent websites and the lack of computer jargon in the explanations. While there is iothing on the list that a dedicated surfer would not be able to find for himself, having in annotated list like this one can certainly save countless hours of wandering the web.

About the Reviewer

Jana Harper Makaafi has been working for BYU-Hawaii since 1992, including one year as the in-country ELI Coordinator in Tonga. She is currently the project leader of a team working to develop an advanced ESL course for the Web. She earned a B.A. in Linguistics at Brigham Young University (1990), and an M.A. in Linguistics at California State University, Long Beach (1992). Her professional interests include bilingualism and language acquisition.