

Spanish in the Land of the Gringo

In a programme of independent research, Serco Usability Services evaluated the Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs) used to provide TV listings on the UK digital television platforms - SKY and ONdigital. During the studies, consumers were asked to use the EPGs to plan their TV viewing.

I grew up in Kentucky, within easy driving distance of a dozen horse farms and a pretty stretch of the Ohio river. Colonel Sanders's own elegant restaurant, a far cry from the KFC fast food outlets, was a quick trip away in Bardstown.

It was a good place to grow up, but back then it wasn't very cosmopolitan. The schools taught foreign languages, but for many of us it was very abstract. I studied Spanish, but as I had never met nor heard anyone speaking Spanish outside of Sesame Street, it felt about as real as learning Klingon or the made-up language of twins.

We started Spanish classes when we are about 11, and back then the classes were large, maybe 40 or so per class. Every year, a few more people would drop out until by the time we graduated high school at 18 there were just two of us left.

The thing about learning languages is that everyone has their own style. Some people have picture-perfect memories and need only hear or see a word once to commit it to memory. Some are social learners and need nothing more than to be parachuted into a situation where they are immersed in the language. Some, like me, are a bit bookish and need to have the rules explained and demonstrated.

Language learning is a highly specialised skill. It doesn't correlate well with other kinds of academic success or general intelligence. Do you know what the greatest predictor of language learning success is? Lack of shyness. Those who are willing to plunge in, talk, and make mistakes are most often the best learners.

Pity the poor language teacher: usually with a large class, diverse styles of learning, and a busy schedule. And what seems to matter most is talking, drilling, and writing – among the most time intensive teaching activities you can imagine.

It seems like a place where maybe computers can help. Online learning is popular among administrators because it has the capacity of replicating best practice very efficiently. Once you know what works, you encapsulate it in a computer-based training system, and duplicating it is as cheap as copying a CD-ROM.

Educators like it too, as it offers the opportunity for students to find a match for their own learning style – not every student has to study in the same way.

Last year, offered the opportunity to study a new online textbook for teaching intermediate Czech, we jumped at the chance to see what the students themselves wanted, and how they liked the flexibility inherent to online learning.

Here are some of our findings.

- **FREEDOM, BUT WITH GUIDANCE.** The students liked the idea of having freedom to pursue their lessons in the way that best matched their style, but easily felt lost and overwhelmed. Their preference was for a strongly delineated path through the material, with the ability to deviate from the path at will.

- **MARKING THE PATH.** The path through the material should be clear from the home page or main landing pages. Most importantly, it should be reinforced by having links at the bottom of the main area of every topic page to the next suggested topic.
- **IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK.** Users preferred exercises that gave immediate feedback, letting them know whether they had the right answer or not. They did not want have to assess their own answers.
- **FAVOURITE FORM OF EXERCISES.** The online textbook that we studied offered a wide variety of exercise types. Like Goldilocks, users found some kinds of exercises too easy (true/false, small multiple choice ranges) and some too hard (essay questions whose answers could not be checked by the computer). What they liked best were: multiple-choice with 4-7 choices each; single word fill- in-the-gaps and drill exercises for conjugations and declensions; and drag-and-drop fill-in-the-gaps.
- **PERSISTENT, CONSISTENT NAVIGATION.** As with many web users, students wanted a consistent navigation mechanism in the form of either a horizontal or vertical navigation bar.
- **AUDIO.** The students liked to hear dialogues on the computer. It was perceived as better than cassette or CD recordings because of the ability to easily replay portions of the dialogue, and more importantly because it allowed them to see the text and hear the dialogue at the same time.
- **VOCABULARY.** Students have the same attitude about learning new words online as they do about other exercises – they want quick feedback. Ideally, they would like a flashcard style system. Failing that, they would like to print a two-column list so they can fold it in half and quiz themselves. On the whole, these students were in most ways similar to other users, but had a number of specific needs related to study in general and language learning in particular.

If you're interested in this subject, we have a paper available about the study with a lot more detail. Write to me at andrew.swartz@serco.com and I'll be glad to send you a copy.

About ExperienceLab

ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

Why not visit the ExperienceLab blog (www.experiencelab.info), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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