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Over the past seven years, YouTube—a popular video-sharing website on which users can upload, share, and view videos—has had an impact on culture, entertainment, and information dissemination in unique and powerful ways, sparking international demonstrations, launching careers of pop star wannabes, spreading inspirational lectures to millions of people, and sharing the exploits of favorite pets worldwide. For many of us, it is hard to believe that YouTube has only been around since 2005, considering how ubiquitous its use has become. A valuable tool for education as well as communication and entertainment, YouTube can be used by language educators as a way to instruct, entertain, and inspire their students.

Within the mind-boggling amount of video resources available on YouTube—an estimated 48 hours of video are uploaded every minute—are many authentic gems that expose students to culture on a new level, help reinforce classroom lessons, and mix education with entertainment.

“I’ve always sought out authentic documents to share with my students,” says Christine Lanphere, a French teacher at Natomas High School in Sacramento, CA. “YouTube is just another source that allows students to see real people speaking French around the world and gain cultural insight. And students like the fact that the videos are real.”

YouTube also provides a way for teachers to connect with today’s “digital natives”—young people who have grown up with digital technology. Digital natives have habits and interests that are drastically different from those of previous generations. Digital natives want instant access to information, hands-on activities, multitasking, social networking, graphics before text, games, and frequent rewards.

Last year, Joseph Terantino explored the use of YouTube for language teaching in a paper, “YouTube for Foreign Languages: You Have To See This Video,” published in the February 2011 issue of *Language Learning & Technology* and he concluded that YouTube can satisfy the needs of both teachers and students. Terantino is Director of the Foreign Language Resource Collection and Critical Language Program and an Assistant Professor of Spanish and Foreign Language Education at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, GA.

“YouTube offers fast and fun access to language and culture-based videos and instruction from all over the globe. It provides an outlet for student- and teacher-created videos, and most importantly, YouTube videos provide students with an opportunity to engage meaningfully in the target language,” he says. He adds that YouTube is especially beneficial for teachers of less commonly taught languages, providing spoken samples and cultural references that are often otherwise unavailable.

“To meet the rapidly evolving expectations of the Web 2.0 generation, educational resources need to be multimedia, mobile, searchable online, and free. For this reason, technologies such as YouTube are rapidly gaining traction in the academic context,” says Deborah Masterson, publications specialist for the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) Hawaii. “The unity of sound and image in video resources makes them a natural for applied linguistics applications.”
She points out many of YouTube’s advantages for educators—a built-in video editor including subtitling in many languages and writing systems, free storage of large files, and easy embedding in websites, e-mail, Facebook, and course management systems.

YouTube has helped breathe new life into the NFLRC Hawaii’s Authentic Chinese Video project. In the mid-1990s with funding from the Department of Education, Stephen Tschudi, a specialist in Technology for Language Education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, shot about 100 minutes of video in Beijing. The video is divided into clips ranging from less than one minute to eight minutes in length and consists chiefly of unrehearsed interviews with ordinary people including cafeteria workers, Peking University students, food vendors, muleteers, and children.

Some of these Chinese clips were made into the KAN NA! Authentic Chinese Reading & Video series, which includes subtitles in English and pinyin (a transliteration of Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet) and activities to aid comprehension and learning. “We only had the funding to create packaged lessons with about a quarter of the clips we post-produced,” says Tschudi. “We put the unpackaged video clips onto YouTube so that people around the world could use them. They have a real cultural richness. One of the most popular video clips is of kindergarteners washing their hands.”

All of these video clips can be found on the NFLRC’s YouTube channel with links to an online archive containing packaged lessons for selected clips, along with a number of other videos on pedagogy, use of technology, plenary speeches, and more. The videos also help publicize the NFLRC Hawaii.

“We have a mandate to produce language learning material for LCTLs,” explains Masterson. “I post links to videos on our YouTube channel on Facebook often, which can really drive traffic and get the word out about NFLRC. Seeing which links are ‘liked,’ ‘shared,’ and commented on gives me a sense of what people are interested in and can guide material development.”

The vast body of material on YouTube can serve as a student-directed source for learning and student choice. “Students like to find and post links to YouTube videos, especially music, on our class Facebook group,” says Tschudi. “It’s really a nexus for things they find interesting.”

Sometimes those videos make it into his class curriculum, like Mandarin versions of songs from the Disney animated movie Mulan. “Content on YouTube is so universal, but the teacher needs to serve as a filter to find the right level,” he adds.

Navigating that vast body of material can be a challenge. “You could spend days searching for just the right video on YouTube,” says Lanphere. “This is where networking is really key.” She suggests asking colleagues and also posing questions on forums like the ACTFL Online Community (community.actfl.org) and the FLTeach listserv (web.cortland.edu/flteach).

**CHANNELING YOUTUBE TO TEACH**

YouTube videos can be used for active or passive educational activities—students can watch videos to gain linguistic and cultural information and they can make videos in the target language, allowing them to creatively express their linguistic skills. Making a video can be a deceptively valuable task: the students are having so much fun they don’t realize how much they are learning.

Tschudi has had his students shoot simple videos of themselves as class projects. For example, he had students describe fruit in a market using specific words for color, shape, and size. For homework, the students watched and commented on one another’s videos. “It creates excitement for the students,” he says. “They want to watch themselves on screen and there is a lot of entertainment value from watching their peers. They are motivated to revisit the material, which reinforces the language.”

In another project, he had students choose a music video and then describe the reasons behind their choice. “Often, the material on YouTube is beyond their grasp, but they can make simple statements about what they see and like,” he says.

Terrantino assigns video creation projects as a way to engage his students outside of class. “Having students give presentations in class creates a lot of dead time,” he says. “If I ask them to make a video of their presentation, it frees up valuable class time. Part of their assignment is to watch one another’s videos and give feedback.”

He grades the feedback like any other written assignment, looking for grammar and fluency as well as thoughtful and constructive comments that show the student has applied critical thinking to the evaluation.

Even mundane materials can be effective teaching tools—like a public service announcement (PSA) about going through customs at the airport. Lanphere has shown her students that PSA, which aired on French television, and an AirFrance safety video that is shown at the start of flights. To bolster the educational value of watching the PSA, Lanphere tasked her students with making brochures presenting the information they saw on the video.

As a pre-viewing activity for the Air France video, she gave her students text from the presentation typed and then cut into separate strips. In pairs, students organized the strips as they thought they might hear them. Then they listened to the audio for the video and made adjustments to their order. They listened a final time to adjust and confirm the correct order before watching the video.
“Even for simple videos like these, the language is pretty fast—so it’s important to prepare your students for what you want them to gain from watching the video,” she says. “Otherwise they are going to miss a lot of the educational value.” She recommends front-loading vocabulary and asking students to classify the ideas that will be coming at them in the video.

Students typically can’t watch a video and take notes or complete a written activity at the same time. Nicole Naditz, a French teacher at Bella Vista High School in Fair Oaks, CA, recommends first watching a video all the way through before starting an activity.

“I usually distribute and explain the activity so the students know what to listen or observe for, but I will have them put their pencils down for the first viewing,” she explains. “Then, during subsequent viewings, students are better able to manage watching the video and completing an activity. My students will usually watch a scene two or three times.”

She likes to pair cloze assignments with a video, in which students fill in missing words from a script. Another idea is a storyboard summary, in which students write key vocabulary on a storyboard or stills from the video. Naditz also likes having her students fill out a graphic organizer answering the five journalistic questions: who, what, where, when, and why.

SUBTITLES MAY HELP

The biggest challenge that many users find with the NFLRC Authentic Chinese video clips is the lack of subtitles. Tschudi would love to subtitle all of the videos, but it is a daunting task. He had a class of advanced students of Chinese subtitle a few of the clips as a class project last year, but it is an assignment only appropriate for students at a high level.

For language learners, especially of languages that do not use the Roman alphabet, subtitles greatly enhance the educational value of the video clips. “Using subtitles in English and pinyin offers Chinese language learners two levels of scaffolding,” he explains.

A body of pedagogical research supports the effectiveness of captioning in language learning. In the paper, “The Effects of Captioning Videos,” Paula Winke, Susan Gass, and Tetyana Sydorenko of Michigan State University found that captioned videos aid novel vocabulary recognition, overall comprehension, and draw learners’ attention to language.

“We believe that our data show that captions help learners see and be able to then parse structural patterns or chunks in the videos, which may assist them in remembering and learning from the patterns presented,” they write.

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CONFRONTING ACCESS ISSUES

One problem for K–12 schools is access to YouTube. Lanphere has frequently had difficulty accessing the site due to firewall issues in her school district.

“It’s frustrating, not being able to use these authentic materials,” she says. “At many schools, decisions about technology are being made away from the classroom. It’s important that teachers advocate for themselves and show how technology helps us be creative and innovative and strengthens learning.”

Terantino says teachers must first rationalize what they are trying to do with YouTube and other technologies and then demonstrate the benefits to administrators and other stakeholders. “It’s very important to have a plan to address behavior just like you would have for your classroom,” he says.

He also cautions teachers to always first watch any videos they plan to show in class even if they come recommended. “What you think is one thing can turn out to be something very different,” he says.

Terantino reinforces to his students at the start of each term that school policies apply when students are online. “I think all students have been exposed to some form of online bullying, so it’s important to remind them to behave as if they are still in the classroom,” he says. “I tell my students that being online does not give you license to behave inappropriately.”

One of the classroom policies is that student-made videos cannot be shared with anyone outside of the class. Terantino always posts class videos as unlisted on YouTube, which means you must have the exact URL to access videos. At the end of the term he typically removes all videos made by the class. He has only experienced a few problems with students’ online behavior and those have been isolated instances of foul language and excessive criticism.

Lanphere believes that part of teaching students 21st century skills is how to behave online. “Blocking access to technology is not realistic today,” she says. “We teach children to look both ways before crossing the street because cars aren’t going away. Online tools like YouTube and Facebook aren’t going away either.”

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