

Language lessons could be just a click away

Anne Einsenberg



Mike Kuiack, an investment banker in Vancouver, British Columbia, using podcasts to learn how to speak Mandarin Chinese. (Farah Nosh for The New York Times)

The best way to learn a foreign language may be to surround yourself with native speakers. But if you cannot manage a trip abroad, the Internet and a broadband computer connection may do the job, too, bringing native speakers within electronic reach for hours of practice.

Web-based services on the market let people download daily lessons in French or Hindi, pop on their headsets, and use Internet telephone service and the reach of social networks to try their conversational skills with tutors or language partners from around the world.

For those who want to polish their high school German before vacation, or to master snippets of well-intoned Mandarin Chinese to charm future business hosts in Shanghai, these sites offer alternatives to more traditional tools like textbooks and CD-ROMs. LiveMocha, at livemocha.com, for example, is a free site where members can tackle 160 hours of beginning or intermediate lessons in French, German, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Hindi or English. There is no charge for tutoring; instead, members tutor one another, drawing on their expertise in their own native language.

Members chat online by typing messages, by talking or, if they have Webcams, by video, in exchanges with others who want to tutor or be tutored. English speakers learning Spanish, for example, can write or speak descriptions of a vacation and receive feedback on their grammar and choice of idioms from native Spanish speakers on the network. A Spanish speaker, in turn, may seek advice from the English speaker about English assignments.

LiveMocha introduced its Web site in late September 2007, said Shirish Nadkarni, chief executive of the company, which is based in Bellevue, Washington. Since then, he said, about 200,000 users from more than 200 countries have joined.

"It's a community of like-minded learners who can leverage their native language proficiency to help one another," he said. The name "LiveMocha" is meant to evoke the relaxed atmosphere of a coffee shop.

The site is still in beta, or testing, phase, Nadkarni said. Advertising will soon be added, as well as charges for some premium content and services.

Paul Aoki, director of the language learning center at the University of Washington, Seattle, signed up at LiveMocha primarily to see if his students might benefit. He says he thinks the

site's social networking component makes it useful. "It seems to be a pretty powerful opportunity for people around the world to connect with language partners," he said.

He also likes the chat capability. "Doing voice and text chat simultaneously is very useful," he said. "If you don't understand something your language partner is saying," he said, even when people at the other end speak slowly, "they can type it out and you can read it."

Curtis Bonk, a professor of education at Indiana University in Bloomington, is specializing in ways to integrate online technologies with teaching. He says LiveMocha is part of an explosion of educational resources for language learning on the Web.

"You no longer have to learn language as an individual in a silo somewhere, using a canned program on a CD-ROM," he said. "Instead, you have thousands of tutors to pick from - if the first one doesn't work out, you can choose another."

Another electronic-based language learning program takes a different approach: podcasting. Praxis Language, based in Shanghai, offers free lessons in either Mandarin Chinese, at ChinesePod.com, or Spanish, at SpanishPod.com, as podcasts.

Many lessons include business-based vocabulary on topics like how to hire a courier in China, said Ken Carroll, a co-founder of Praxis. While the podcasts are free, transcripts, exercises and other services typically cost \$9 to \$30 a month, he said. For \$200 a month, members can receive daily tutoring from professional, native-speaking teachers by way of Skype, the Internet-based telephone service.

Carroll says ChinesePod has more than 270,000 visitors a month, several thousand of them paying about \$240 a year for a combination of premium services. Most of the paying customers live in the United States, he said.

"They tend to be thirty-somethings, slightly mature, with some kind of business connection to China," he said.

Mike Kuiack, an investment banker in Vancouver, British Columbia, who often travels to China, was an off-and-on student of Chinese for eight and a half years before he signed on to ChinesePod. He has since been studying diligently for a year and a half, paying about \$240 a year for premium services. Since he started using the service, he said, his vocabulary had grown as much as it did in all of the previous years of study combined.

"Speaking and listening skills were what I needed," he said. "The podcasts have been very useful for this. Part of the reason I've made so much progress is that they are so enjoyable."

He works on lessons whenever he has a moment. "I listen when I'm stuck in traffic," he said, "and also at my PC, where I can listen and read at the same time."

The studying is starting to pay off at work.

"I don't try to conduct negotiations in Chinese," he said, "but now at least I can listen to what's going on in meetings."

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