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AT RANDOM: ON LANGUAGE

Plug in, dial up, learn a foreign language

By Nathan Bierma
Special to the Tribune
Published January 24, 2007

I've always wished I could speak another language, but I don't have time to take a class and I've been reluctant to invest in a pair of big headphones and a fancy (pricey) program of audio cassettes or CDs. Especially because I'm not sure what language I'd like to learn.

Thanks to the Internet, though, I'm running out of excuses. If you have a broadband connection and a computer, you have access to a world of foreign language instruction for free -- and if you have an MP3 audio player, you can carry lessons around with you to listen on the bus, in the car or anywhere else you listen to music.

I found all kinds of language lessons in free podcasts, which are like radio programs you download from the Internet.

Here are Web sites offering the quality, free language podcasts I could find, after a thorough search and a quick listen. They are where I plan to start myself -- but I'm not a language teacher, so caveat listener.

Mandarin Chinese

[www.chinesepod.com](#)

Named one of Time magazine's top-10 podcasts (of any kind), this handsomely laid out site with crystal-clear audio files is probably the best available introduction to Mandarin -- other than going to Shanghai, where the podcasts are produced. You have to pay to get all the goods -- transcripts, flashcards, complete audio archives -- but the first seven podcasts, along with the most recent podcasts, are free.

Introduced with mandolin music in the background, the podcasts have an English introduction and explanations of Mandarin dialogue. The speakers clearly give the proper intonation of the words, which is crucial for meaning in Mandarin.

Also see [www.melnyks.com](#).

French

[www.frenchpodclass.com](#)

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Podcasting from Les Adrets in southern France, "Sebastien" offers French lessons with a French flavor. The audio quality is sometimes uneven -- especially when he pops his "P"s into the microphone -- and the podcast could probably live without the interludes of French songs. But other than that, the lessons are straightforward, and the Web site has plenty of free resources. Sebastien speaks English with a thick French accent, which can be both distracting and educational -- hearing him pronounce English with French sounds is itself an introduction to the sounds of French.

Also see www.learnfrenchbypodcast.com.

Italian

www.learnitalianpod.com

This podcast originates not from Rome or Tuscany, but Ft. Lauderdale, though if the podcast's hosts, Italian natives "Jane" and "Massimo," didn't say so, you'd never be able to tell. Again, I found the hosts' thick accents at times both confusing and phonetically helpful. The Web site includes a handy glossary.

Spanish

www.coffeebreakspanish.com

Called Coffee Break Spanish, these in-depth episodes feature a host and a Spanish student, "Kara," who learns along with you as you listen. The premium membership includes written guides and flashcards. You can even get a Coffee Break Spanish T-shirt.

Also see www.instaspanish.com.

German

www.mygermanclass.com

The options for learning German by podcast seem limited. You can start with the quirky lessons at www.mygermanclass.com, but they are videocasts, not just audio podcasts, so you have to watch them at your computer -- you can't listen and learn while jogging or driving.

The BBC page on the German language (www.bbc.co.uk/languages/german) has some good introductory audio files. The German department of the University of Wisconsin at Madison (german.lss.wisc.edu/podcast) also is a great source for podcasts in German, but they're geared toward intermediate learners.

Russian

www.spoonfulofrussian.com

Host Natalia is a Russian native and tutor now living in Charlotte, after her New Orleans home was destroyed by Katrina. She produces this podcast with her daughters. The Web site has written aids in the Russian alphabet.

Arabic



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thearabicpodclass.blogspot.com

Produced in Damascus, Syria, this podcast presents Arabic phrases and explains the vocabulary and grammar of those phrases. It's too bad that the Web site doesn't offer any written materials to help with the Arabic alphabet.

Greek

www.hau.gr/hau/en/Home.html

The Web site of the Hellenic American Union offers podcasts for learning modern Greek. Under "Services," click "Greek Podcasts."

The HAU offers this service as part of its advocacy for Greek culture and language. This illustrates a new principle for passing on a language in the age of the Internet: Want a lot of people to be able to easily learn your language? Make them a podcast.

Latin

www.haverford.edu/classics/audio

Granted, it's a little late to converse with native speakers of Latin, as there haven't been any for centuries. But learning Latin -- the language of science and philosophy and the root language of more than half the words in the English language -- is a good education for speakers of English, French, Spanish and other related languages.

English as a Second Language

www.eslpod.com

Worldwide, more people speak English as a second language than as a native language. Podcasts could play a role in teaching the world our wacky language, and this podcast is as good as any.

Write to Nathan Bierma at onlanguage@gmail.com.

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