Web Evaluation
BBC Online – Languages: German
http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/german/

The BBC's online language course is geared to anyone wanting to learn a foreign language. I in particular chose to evaluation their German section since I'm a German speaker and am able to better assess the effectiveness of the website. The BBC provides this website free of charge. In addition I also found that this website is also quite effective and to be on par or better than some of the paid websites that exist for language learning. The BBC is publicly funded and their "mission is to enrich people's lives with programmes that inform educate an entertain." This site falls well with in the real of their mission. I also appreciate that they make the content available world wide instead or restricting it to the UK region.

The website itself is divided into multiple sections, which I though were useful and made it easy to find necessary information. The sections on the home page are (from top left working down and right):

Learn German – This section has a "Test your German" link that takes the user to a placement test to tell the user whether they are a beginner, fluent, or somewhere in the middle. This is a good tool for those that have had German in the past, but don't know where to resume learning *"German resources and Worksheets"* – These are provides resources that a teacher would find extremely useful. They have freely available user guides, syllabus, vocabulary lists, basic topics to start with, as well as some grammar instruction. These are all resources that a first year teacher could use. "German weekly email tips," which actually takes you to a page where you could sign up for email tips on all of the languages that they offer. Lastly is "German TV & Radio" which are resources on where to find German media.

Phrase of the day – This is quite simply a German phrase for the day and an RSS feed incase you just want to receive your phrase using your favorite newsreader.

Find a local class – This are starts out minimizes and takes you to a page where you could look for actual German classes in the UK.

German world weather – The weather in Berlin, but the user has the option to change to a few other major German-speaking cities. The weather displayed is in Centigrade with no option to change it.

In the center of the page there is also a banner with topics that vary every time the page is reloaded. This banner provides a picture that illustrates the main topic that will be covered if the banner/picture is clicked on.

The Remaining sections are actually geared towards the actual language instruction. These areas are "Introduction to German," German for intermediate," and "German for beginners." These areas leads to pages with the basic information such as facts, words, phrases, the alphabet. What is nice about this area is that the majority of the content are videos where the "teacher" helps walk the viewer through the alphabet, word gender, telling time, why German words are so long, and words that have a similar pronunciation as English. All of these are important topics that are nice to a language learner. What I like about it these areas are that the intermediate area also provides more cultural information such as slang and a small tv series geared towards a beginner. The last section I found could have been better phrased "German for beginners" I felt could have been combined with the introduction section given the titles. The beginner section actually provides a 12-week course/program designed to cover the basic concepts that would be learned in a classroom with the assessment areas being called a "Challenge."

Design

Since the website is designed to engage the user and really easy to navigate, there are many of images and videos. The menu bar itself is located on the left hand column, but the website keeps a maximum resolution to prevent having to need to scroll back up to go to a different section. With out these a user would be quickly be turned off given the nature of language learning, which is not just translating. The interactivity providing pictures that provide a snapshot of the country along with the videos to interact with the user makes the site useable and engaging.

The images provided are placed and relate to the text that they are supporting. Also since the some of the text that is provided is used to support learning a language many of it have associated audio so that the user can read the text then click on the audio to hear how it's pronounced. I did notice though that from some parts the text that is provided is within a picture, which would make it difficult to use with a screen reader.

The audio though was is extremely high quality in that it's loud enough, easy to understand, well enunciated, and there is no or very little background noise depending on the scenario, although since this is a BBC site I have higher standards than what would be found on some random blog.

I do appreciate that the site does not use audio clips and effects just to be cute and simply have them to be annoying, but rather the audio that is on the website is directly related to the content that is provided and helps to instruct the user/learner.

The audio that is provided also depends depending on the language level, which is a good thing. The introductory/beginning lessons have primarily short audio clips of the text in the pictures, but the advanced/intermediate areas provide the user with more options. These advanced areas actually provide 3 options. The user is able to easily pull up a transcript of what they are hearing but the listening options is either just the audio or a video with audio, which gives the user the option of deciding what they want to do. Sadly I was not able to confirm if the video provides a subtitle where the words that are being spoken are highlighted, because I was not able to get the video to play. The video options are given in a real player format, which is not really mac friendly and in order to view the audio the user would need to download additional software. This could be avoided by simply using more common video formats or provided the user with an option.

While the website helps the user learn a language, and could be useful to the user depending on needs, i.e. work or school, it's still a one way website and it does not give the ability to interact or collaborate with others, aside from the option to find a real life school. In addition the website could provide more interactive features such as a game. The only interaction portions are the challenges and the placement exams.

Given the nature of the website, it may be able to keep the users involved enough because of the videos, but I think that the site might cause the users to loose a bit of interest with out more interactive components. I find that given enough time or motivation, the website would be able to give the user a rudimentary understanding of the language enough to get by on perhaps a short vacation trip. The content that is provided is definitely easy to access because it's all easy to read text (black on white) with authentic audio to support the user and the video clips would give the user a quick look into the country of the language. While the site still need some more changes, it is still better than any of the free options out there and even the ones that give the user a free trial livemocha or mangolanguages.

Also given that the website is from the BBC, this alone lends it the credibility so that the users know that the material has been proof read and good enough for the user to learn the basics. In addition, since this is the BBC and the only copyright on there is from the BBC I would assume that all of the content belongs to the BBC and was created by the BBC. Given the size of the BBC I doubt that there would be very little if any copyright violations, especially since the site has been online for a while. The age of the content that is provided though is unknown, the only date available is the 2011 copyright for the site.

Overall I would still highly recommend this site give it's few drawbacks and perhaps possible age due to not having too many interactive options. The BBC still has the best free site that I have been able to locate. They provide a good enough foundation in the language to the point that I think a studious enough learner would be able to get by in the foreign country where that language is spoken. I think though that to be able to make the best use of the website the user would need to spend many hours/weeks to get a good grasp of the language, which is also implied with their 12week program. Unlike plain websites, since this is geared for learning a new language the user would have to be willing to spend the time, because there is no quick approach to learning a language. If the user was looking for just quick phrases, they would be able to find them here, but in my opinion that would be of no value.