Teaching Materials on Language Endangerment, an Interactive E-learning Module on the Internet

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Abstract
In 2007, in the framework of the NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) Research Programme on Endangered Languages, an interactive e-learning module has been developed on language endangerment. The module for students in secondary schools (15-18 years of age) is available free of charge, so far in Dutch and in English, on the internet: http://www.bedreigdetalen.nl. In the learning module “Endangered Languages” students learn about the diversity of the world’s languages, about the relationship between language and culture, why languages disappear, how serious that is, whether we can preserve languages and about the origins of language.

Background
As Kees Hengeveld, Chair of the NWO Endangered Language Programme (ELP) of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) put it in his announcement of this module, ELP “has as one of its continuous aims to increase the awareness of the problem of language endangerment among the general public. The programme felt that one of the best ways to achieve this for the years to come was to prepare teaching materials on the issue of language endangerment for secondary education.”

For this purpose, an interactive e-learning module has been developed as teaching materials on language endangerment in the framework of ELP. The module for students in the last years of secondary schools (15-18 years of age) is available free of charge on the internet: http://www.bedreigdetalen.nl. In autumn 2007 the full Dutch version went online, followed in spring 2008 by the full English version.

The Module
The module “Endangered Languages, an Interactive E-learning Module on the Internet” consists of two lessons and can be used as optional teaching materials for two or three hours in the discipline geography. Since it contains many issues about languages in general, especially in the first lesson, it can be used as well in language teaching.

The module comes with instructions for both teachers and students and with worksheets. The interactive worksheets with mostly open questions can be downloaded, printed and filled out by students individually or in a classroom setting with a teacher. All answers to the questions in the worksheets can be found by studying the slides and the short animations. The only extra material students will need is an atlas.

As it is nearly impossible to discuss within two or three hours all five continents each with its specific problems as regards language endangerment, the topics are mainly exemplified by two ethnic groups and their respective languages: the Tundra Yukagir people from Northeastern Siberia and the Mpur people from Western New Guinea. The second lesson zooms in on the two regions where these two peoples live. The choice for Tundra Yukagir and Mpur is far from arbitrary. Since many years the author has studied their languages and cultures. She has lived for long periods with both groups and has a rich collection of audiovisual materials which could be used without copyright problems. Also, the author was able to edit the movies in the awareness that she did not violate the original context from which the fragments were selected. The two peoples were also considered to be representative enough to serve as good examples of endangered languages and cultures and, on the other hand, they were considered sufficiently different to be attractive for students and to provide appropriate questions in the worksheets.

In a colophon the persons consulted and sources and references used for the development of the module are listed.

In order to awake awareness about languages in general, students can check what they know about languages in a “Starting quiz”. In this quiz, questions like “How many languages are spoken on earth?” and “What do you think: more languages disappear or more languages appear per year?” must be answered, and statements like
“A language is a language only if it has its own script” and “Each country has one official language, called the national language” must be confirmed or rejected. Users of the course have reported that the answers to these questions can be real eye-openers for the students. The quiz should be made before starting the first lesson.

First Lesson
In the first lesson six themes are discussed:
1. about language
2. how many languages do you speak?
3. languages of the world
4. the origins of language
5. endangered languages
6. language loss, maintenance and revitalization

Each of the six themes is subdivided into text slides and animations with many more details, including maps, sound examples and games. The text slides discuss a set of items that can be studied in more depth by clicking on a “next” button at the bottom of each slide, after which a new slide appears with short movies or a slide show. Some movies and animations are commented upon or explained in a caption which can be read by clicking on the question mark next to the movie window. By placing the cursor under the movie window, buttons for playing, stopping or pausing the movie and adjusting the sound volume appear. A student can always go back and move forward through the six themes by clicking on < or >, respectively.

In the module, the notion “language” is taken very broadly and includes sign languages and street languages as well. After an introduction in theme 1 on how “language affects everyone in society, both consciously and unconsciously”, and issues like the relation between language and culture, the second theme directly addresses the student. In The Netherlands and in many other countries, classrooms do not consist of students from one nationality, religion or race. In many Dutch schools, Dutch students are not even in the majority, and this part of the course tries to invoke awareness of this situation.

After completing theme 6, a question appears: “Want to learn more?”. By clicking on the question mark more slides appear on language documentation, research and fieldwork.

For example, the slides on Language Documentation and Fieldwork show the following texts:

“We want to know how language works in the brain and how that’s different for each language. This knowledge is essential for uncovering the universal characteristics that all languages share. Since new linguistic phenomena are still being discovered, we're a long way from knowing if a certain linguistic phenomenon is unique, for example.

If linguists aren’t quick to make audio and video records of undocumented languages, there will continue to be many blank spots on the map of the world’s languages. Currently, only one-third of the world’s languages have been documented to one degree or another. And that’s not enough to give us a good understanding of linguistic phenomena. Documenting as many of the world’s languages as possible is necessary for a number of reasons. These include gaining insight into human thought in language, the functions of language (communication, literature), the culture of a particular society, how certain communities interact with and view their surroundings and the environment, knowledge of nature, unique skills and techniques (e.g. the use of instruments and tools, construction methods) and knowledge of traditional medicines. This cultural heritage disappears when a language dies out.

In language documentation, the Internet can play an important role in preserving and revitalizing languages. A growing number of countries, cities and villages have access to the Internet, even in remote areas. More and more organizations devoted to endangered languages are publishing their language documentation online. Just see how many hits you get when you enter the words ‘endangered languages’ into a search engine. Many languages will continue to disappear as so many have before them. This process cannot be stopped. Many linguists document languages even if they are doomed to disappear. Some languages have fewer than ten speakers, or even just a single speaker.

Linguists travel to the location where an endangered language is spoken to do fieldwork and to help people who want to preserve their language. Good fieldworkers make audio and video records of the language, transcribing texts in full and producing word lists. If possible, they also create teaching material for the mother tongue speakers. They then relay the knowledge they have gathered to the language community by returning all the published audio, video and written material to them. Even if a particular language is certain to disappear, it has at least been documented, is now available for research and can be used by the mother tongue speakers.”

At the end of lesson 1 a slide has been added for further study with links to various websites concerned with endangered languages. These links connect the student directly with the sites involved.
Questions to be answered in the worksheets are, for example, “How can you explain that in Northeast Siberia, next to the mother tongue, Russian is learned?”, “Explain using the terms language, culture, knowledge of flora, what happens if a language community loses its language”.

Second Lesson

The aim of the second lesson is to provide more detail about the environment of the peoples introduced in lesson 1 and about the main factors causing language endangerment and language loss.

In the second lesson themes are:
- geography (geographical location, climate, landscape, flora and fauna, way of life)
- daily life (living, livelihood, health, language, school and education, transport)
- traditional song and dance

In the second lesson students learn more about the two aforementioned language communities with people speaking an endangered language, the Tundra Yukagir in the village Andryushkino in the Northeast of the Sakha Republic, Russian Federation, and the Mpur in the villages Anjai and Saukorem in the Bird’s Head Area of the Indonesian province Papua.

This second lesson focuses on geography and ways of life. Similarities and contrasts between the two communities are discussed, topics which are also reflected in the worksheets.

Our General Message: Enjoy Diversity

In order to avoid leaving students with a “sad doom-and-gloom story”, much attention is paid to issues like language revitalization, the pride of a people for its own language, culture and traditions, the importance of self-esteem and own identity. Also, the focus is on how peoples themselves, social organizations, schools and governments can contribute to language maintenance. Instead of having to worry about yet another problem, students are invited and stimulated to enjoy the wide variety of other peoples’ languages and cultures.

Classroom Experience and Statistics

Since autumn 2007 the module has been used in the Dutch classroom as an extension to the subject Geography. In general students enjoy using the module and watching the movies and animations. Teachers confirm that the issues discussed are a valuable addition to other subjects in the school curriculum like language learning, culture and cultural change. Some language teachers use it as well and have their students visit the site as homework using the worksheets.

The module and the worksheets have been tested in the classroom situation. The issues of the module turned out to be a useful addition to the regular teaching materials on geography. The worksheets of the first lesson guide the student through the webpages, whereas in the second lesson students have to find their way themselves while navigating through the various topics. This seems to work quite well.

In the Dutch context, the strong side of the module is that by deepening the various themes, students learn that there is more about languages and cultures than is dealt with in their regular courseware. In their books it says that language, religion and traditions are part of a culture. In the module it is shown what exactly this means, especially when it comes to languages and the way we use languages, how languages change, can be endangered and have their impact on a people. Links in the module to languages of their contemporaries make the students aware of these processes and of the changes in their own language. Students enjoy the second lesson because two peoples, the Tundra Yukagir and the Mpur, are compared who live in a completely different climate very far away from The Netherlands. The various themes in this lesson are more closely related to geographic subjects like the relationship between landscape and location, permafrost phenomena, livelihood, the use of the soil in different climates.

The site may be called successful: from January till June 2008 it has been visited by some 2000 unique visitors, the number of visits itself being much higher.
Technical Requirements
The module comes in a Dutch and an English version. There is no difference between the two versions, so no adaptations for English have been made with respect to specific Dutch items.

The only technical requirement for the module is a computer with sound facilities, access to the Internet, and Adobe Flash Player which can be downloaded at the address http://www.adobe.com/downloads/.
 Even if the connection is slow, the module works quite well. For those schools who don’t have access to the Internet, a separate CD-Rom is available with both the Dutch and English version and can be ordered by sending an email to c ode@uva.nl.

The worksheets are in Word documents, so teachers can easily change questions or add new items to them. This may be necessary in countries outside The Netherlands and especially so in countries that in many respects do not resemble The Netherlands at all.

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