

Approaches to language learning: Blending tradition with innovation

MARK SHUTTLEWORTH ^a

^a *School of European Languages, Culture and Society,*

University College London, U.K.

Email: m.shuttleworth@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract—Experienced language learners have always tended to work out their own strategies to maximise their effectiveness; examples of this would include consciously incorporating newly learnt words and phrases in one's own speaking and writing, reading real texts on topics that are of interest to one and learning to paraphrase so as to utilise one's knowledge to the greatest possible effect. Such approaches will probably always continue to have considerable validity. However, the age of the internet and mobile technology is enabling the activity of language learning to be enhanced and supported in new and innovative ways. Firstly, the vast amount of user-generated content now available in many languages on the web (including video content on sites such as Youtube) on every topic under the sun can now be exploited for language learning purposes. Secondly, there are now a wide range of apps (such as reading aids or flashcard utilities), each of which is designed to support particular aspects of the learning process. Finally, wikis and other collaborative writing projects help to make language learning a more active and even creative activity.

The paper will present a few examples of these new kinds of approach. Chief among these will be the showcasing of a user-driven wiki for learners of Mandarin Chinese that is based at University College London. One of the emphases throughout will be on considering the extent to which the new approaches and technologies considered are in the spirit of traditional language learning or should be considered a new departure.

Keywords-principles of language learning; internet; mobile devices; wikis; apps

Language learning is no easy activity. Quite the opposite in fact: it probably comes naturally to very few, and even those who seem to have a flair for it will need to apply themselves with great dedication over an extended period of time in order to achieve a reasonable level of proficiency in a language. And yet there has always been a need for people to know other languages, and this has every chance of continuing to be the case. Even with applications such as Google Translate,¹ Wordlens² and the English > Mandarin speech translator currently under development by Microsoft,³ which appear to be

on the point of rendering the learning of other languages an unnecessary and obsolete activity, I believe that (at least some) human beings will always wish to be able to communicate with each other across language barriers with the immediacy that such applications cannot provide, for all their many obvious advantages. More importantly perhaps, for a long time to come it is likely that the most sensitive interlingual communication will continue to be entrusted to humans.

This paper will start by considering in Section I what are likely to be some of the constants that will continue to characterise the activity of learning another language through what is likely to be a period of great change. It will aim to do this by enumerating what might be considered to be some of the habits that successful language learners develop for themselves. Following this, the next three sections will consider how this activity has changed with the advent of the new technology, focusing in particular on new approaches that are genuinely helpful to the learner. With this aim in view Section II will focus on the potential for language learning that has been unleashed by the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. The emphasis of Section III will be on applications – and in particular mobile apps – that have been developed with the language learner in mind. Finally, Section IV will discuss collaborative writing as a means to language learning, and will focus on a wiki that is being developed at University College London.

What follows is certainly not intended as anything like an exhaustive list but focuses on a selection of new possibilities for the twenty-first century language learner.

I. PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

Any experienced linguist will develop a set of mental attitudes and practical strategies that will enhance his or her ability to make rapid progress when learning a new language; these are essential approaches that will help the language learner to overcome the sheer unnaturalness of the activity being undertaken. While this will differ from person to person a typical list might include at least some of the following:

1. In the early stages of learning a new language, work out a basic survival kit that would consist of the following kinds of item: basic greetings; *I like, I want*, etc. (the 1st person form being the most important to

¹ <http://translate.google.co.uk>

² <http://questvisual.com>

³ <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/research/stories/speech-to-speech.aspx>

acquire in the case of languages with verbs that conjugate); simple directions; *Do you speak ...?*; talking about yourself in simple terms.

2. Motivation is of course of key importance at all stages: you should actively *want* to improve your knowledge of the language by using every method at your disposal and by turning every situation into a language learning opportunity
3. Be clear in your mind what you need the language for: is it for tourism purposes, in order to be able to converse or to read novels?
4. Work on the language little and often (and even interrupt another activity for a couple of minutes every half an hour in order to do so); if working for a longer period of time then the session should be split up into different activities
5. For most people, simply reading through (or writing out) lists of vocabulary is not the most effective learning strategy; rather, as a minimum, test yourself on new words
6. Try to *recall* words you have been studying, once again briefly and often; again, recalling is better than repeatedly reading or copying out
7. Learn words in categories; for example, if you find you know the word for *year*, make sure you know what *month* and *week* are too
8. Work out your own mnemonics wherever possible: these should preferably be vivid mental associations that personalise the learning of new vocabulary and make it easier to recall
9. Consciously incorporate newly learnt words and phrases in your own speaking and writing in order to reinforce them
10. Be driven by your curiosity: for example, constantly ask yourself if you know particular words in the second language
11. Following on from that, consciously plug gaps in your knowledge: for example, if you are lacking a vital word during a conversation, make sure you find out what it is straight afterwards; also, anticipate what words you are likely to need in a situation that is about to arise
12. Visualise all the situations in which you might find yourself on a visit to the country and anticipate the key words you will need to know
13. Keep a record of your progress and your discoveries
14. Learn to talk about yourself in increasingly complex ways
15. Gear the learning of new words to acquiring the basic vocabulary of the language and to your special interests; for example, film or book titles can be used as an effective means of contextualising new vocabulary

16. As soon as possible, start reading short, real texts on topics that interest you, even if you do not understand everything you read
17. Get into the habit of surfing the web in the second language in order to find reading material and also to resolve grammatical queries
18. In terms of general reading at an early stage of language learning, suitable texts to tackle might include the following: house and home magazines; *Hello* magazine or its equivalent; horoscopes; questionnaires; book reviews and synopses from Amazon or equivalent; university (or other) home pages. Often newspapers are not the most suitable type of text. For the more advanced: read in translation a book you were planning to read in your own language (or at least an extract from it)
19. Get into the habit of paraphrasing so as to utilise your knowledge to the greatest possible effect: if you cannot say exactly what you want, rephrase it in a simpler way
20. When you are in the country where the language is spoken you will probably be surrounded by all kinds of different linguistic stimuli: be open to these and learn from as many of them as possible

Using approaches such as these the experienced language learner is likely to be able to assimilate the enormous body of theoretical and practical knowledge that needs to be mastered more rapidly than would perhaps otherwise be the case. This list of course makes no specific reference to language learning technology. Sections II-IV present specific examples of a range of different technology-driven approaches to language learning, and we will in fact see that there is a considerable amount of interlinking between these contemporary methods and the principles set out above. However, one of the things that will interest us below is the extent to which these principles are still reflected in the technology that has totally revolutionised so many other areas of our lives over the last twenty years; and, following on from that, the extent to which they can be enhanced by the use of apps and other electronic services.

II. WEB 2.0

The term “Web 2.0” has been around for more than ten years, and is used to refer to the result of the gradual change in attitudes towards the web that has made possible the development of new applications and approaches such as social media, blogs, wikis and crowdsourcing – in fact, just about any application or service that involves interaction and collaboration among a virtual community of users.

This new way of conceptualising and utilising the web has engendered a wide range of innovative approaches designed to facilitate the language learning process. In this short section we will consider just two examples: firstly, a website dedicated to developing mnemonics collaboratively and secondly, adding subtitles to video content.

A. Think a Link

The Think a Link website⁴ is chiefly aimed at school children but the concept, and most of the examples, would probably be of interest to adult language learners as well. Mnemonics (“links”) are offered on a wide range of topics – not only French, German, Latin and Spanish but also Arts and Literature, Geography, Science and Nature, and so on. Users are invited to rate links on a scale of one to ten and also to suggest improvements. They can of course also add links of their own. Fig. 1 shows the link suggested for remembering the German word for *apple*:



Figure 1. Link for German *Apfel*: “**A**pple were delighted when the plan for their i-phone **a**pp fell into place”.

With an approval score of 6.78 this can be considered to be a reasonably successful link, links in the German Words section receiving ratings of between 4.00 and 8.67.

B. Subtitling of video content

There are a number of different approaches to subtitling videos on the web. While most explanations of how to add subtitles to Youtube videos assume that you will be doing this to your own videos (see for example [5]) for the simple reason that it is not currently possible to add your subtitles to someone else’s video without their agreement, there is at least one approach that allows you to get round this, and that is the one provided by Amara,⁵ which claims to be “The easiest way to caption and translate any video” [1]. Producing your own subtitles is an innovative way to interact with text in the language you are learning – or, indeed, to practise writing in that language – and at the same time it potentially provides a valuable service to other web users.

Almost any video on the web can be subtitled – either in the original language for the deaf and hard-of-hearing or in another language – as long as the URL is submitted to the Amara website, while an embed code needs to be issued to enable other users to access your subtitles. Subtitles can also be produced collaboratively via a dedicated website. All the tools offered are open source.

III. USE OF MOBILE AND OTHER APPS

This section will introduce Anki, Duolingo and Lingua.ly, three apps that claim to be of great help to the language learner. Of these, the first two are regularly included in lists of the best apps for language learning (see for example [2]; [4]; [6]). All

⁴ <http://www.thinkalink.co.uk>

⁵ <http://www.amara.org>

three are free, although there are additional services connected with Anki that are available for payment only.

Each of these three apps seems to be in sympathy with between eight and ten of the principles listed above, but is particularly well adapted to learning new words and other items.

A. Anki

Anki⁶ is a flashcard app that is available for Windows, Mac, Linux, Android and iOS. While it is ideally suited for learning words in a foreign language, it describes itself as “content-agnostic” [3] as it can equally easily be used for memorising names and faces, learning poetry or practising guitar chords [3]. The decks you hold in the app can therefore serve a wide range of purposes, as illustrated in Fig. 2:

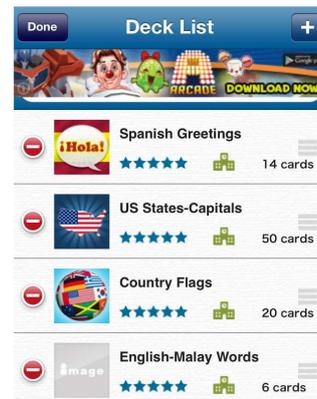


Figure 2. List of loaded decks on the app’s front page.

Any deck can be selected in order to edit or add to the collection of cards or to test yourself on the content. Editing cards or adding to the card list is simple as can be seen in Fig. 3:

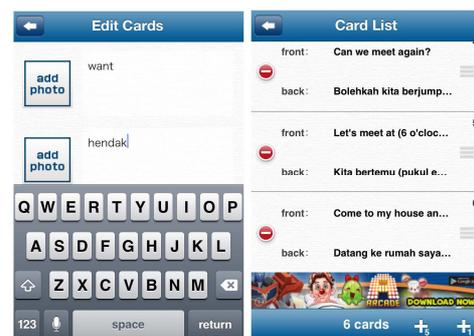


Figure 3. Editing an individual card and adding cards to a particular deck.

The front and back sides of each card contain the word or phrase in the two languages. Extra cards can be added by tapping the +5 or +1 icon at the bottom of the screen.

Ready-made decks can be downloaded from the internet (although there is no guarantee of quality as each one is the

⁶ <http://ankisrs.net>

work of an unknown user) and, likewise, your own decks can be uploaded for other people to make use of.

You test yourself by trying to recall the word or phrase on the other side of the card being displayed, as can be seen in Fig. 4:

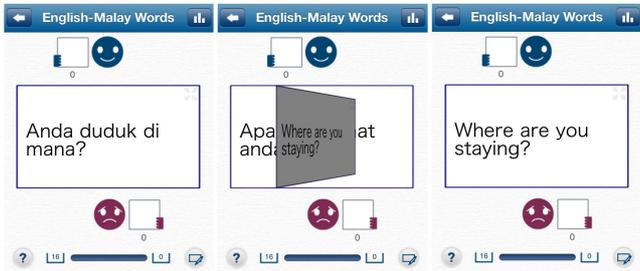


Figure 4. How you can test yourself using Anki; the second image shows the animation of the card flipping over from one side to the other.

As can be seen in Fig. 5 you are invited to classify each word as known or unknown, and when you finish a deck Anki shows you your score:



Figure 5. Testing yourself in Study Mode.

Anki offers three study modes, depending on your preferences and circumstances.

B. Duolingo

Duolingo⁷ is once again a free app that enables you to study Spanish, French, Italian, German or Portuguese. It is available over the web and also in versions for iOS and Android.

The basic model on which it works is that you are first of all introduced to some new words and grammar points and then you do exercises to reinforce them. For new words you are always presented with four options to choose from as shown in Fig. 6: as you select an option the word is pronounced for you. Once the words have been introduced the first exercise is to select the word that is missing from a sentence, as in Fig. 7.

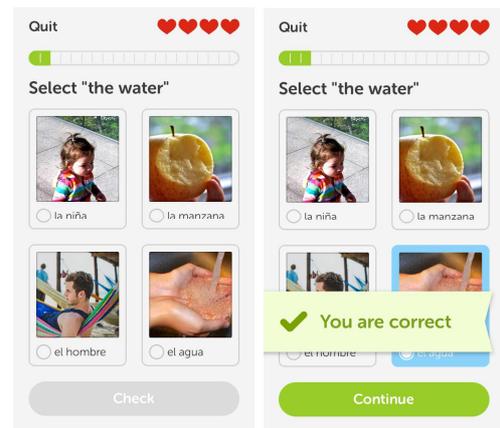


Figure 6. Being introduced to new lexical items.

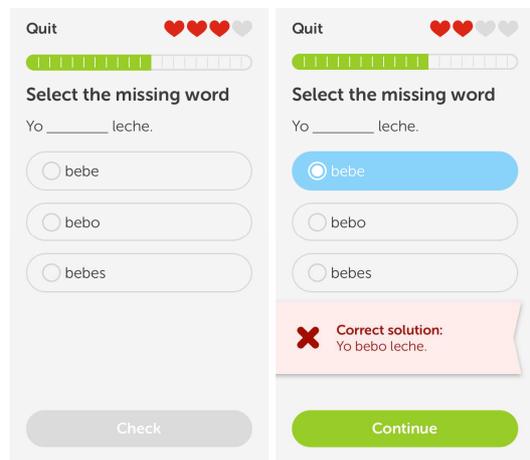


Figure 7. Using a newly-acquired item to fill a gap in a sentence.

For each lesson you are given four lives (or “hearts”), which you lose whenever you make a mistake.

Following that you are asked to use the new words to make sentences by dragging the correct word into the right position, as in Fig. 8:

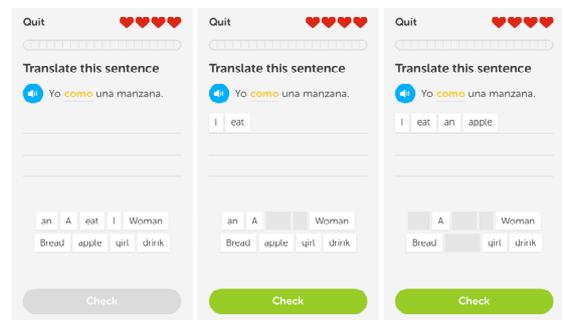


Figure 8. Building sentences with newly learnt words.

Duolingo also includes a speaking exercise as illustrated in Fig. 9:

⁷ <http://www.duolingo.com>



Figure 9. Duolingo speaking exercise.

If at any point you lose too many lives you have to repeat the lesson, as shown in Fig. 10:

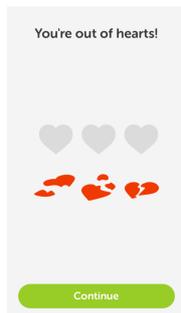


Figure 10. Losing all your lives in Duolingo.

If you following a Duolingo course to its conclusion you will end up with a vocabulary of about two thousand words. However, the language learning is in fact only one side of Duolingo. The other half of its mission is to provide crowdsourced translations of web content that other organisations have asked Duolingo to translate. It is this business model that enables Duolingo to be offered to language learners free of charge, and indeed it is these very language learners who do the translating – each being fed sentences to translate or vote on that are appropriate to their level of knowledge.

C. Lingua.ly

The final app that I intend to focus on in this section cannot be found on most top app lists. However, I have decided to include it because of its innovative nature and also because it ties in with one of the principles that I suggested in Section I. Lingua.ly⁸ can be installed as an extension for the web browser Chrome and at the time of writing is available for Spanish, English, French, Hebrew and Arabic. It ties in with principle number 17 from the list presented in Section I in that it finds texts from the WWW for you to read on the basis of the words that you know or are learning. Its four basic functions are “Find something to read”, “Study new words suggested by Lingua.ly”, “Study your own list of words” and “Practise the words you collected”.

If you do not have your own list of words you may use one of five nine-word word packs provided by Lingua.ly, as for example in Fig. 11, for Spanish:

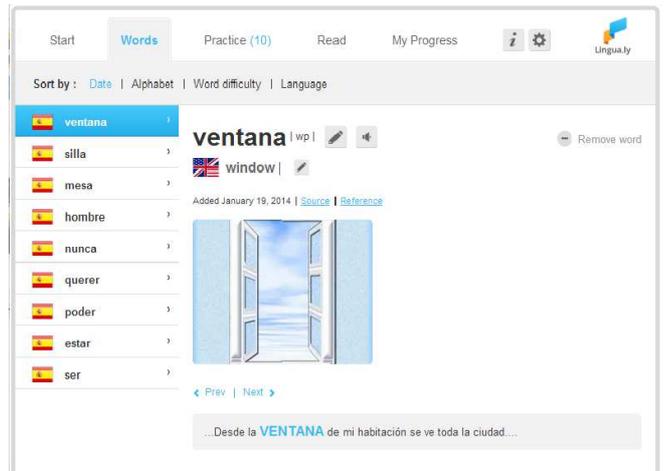


Figure 11. Basic word pack for Spanish with the entry for *ventana* (“window”) highlighted.

This is the simplest and contains very basic items of vocabulary. The fifth and most advanced word pack contains words such as *swollen*, *falter* and *leafy*.

Even on the basis of just the nine very elementary lexical items contained in the first word pack Lingua.ly is able to suggest websites to read in a very targeted manner as the example in Fig. 12 shows:



Figure 12. Extract from a website suggested by Lingua.ly on the basis of the presence of matching lexical items.

Here the highlighted words are items that are contained in the basic word pack. Double-clicking on a word will look it up and cause it to be added to your wordlist as illustrated in Fig. 13:



Figure 13. Adding an item to the wordlist.

Words can be practised and revised to aid memorisation. Practice tests come in three sizes: coffee break (five words), regular size (fifteen words) and word feast (thirty words). Fig. 14 shows the format of a typical test, which is multiple choice:

⁸ <http://lingua.ly>

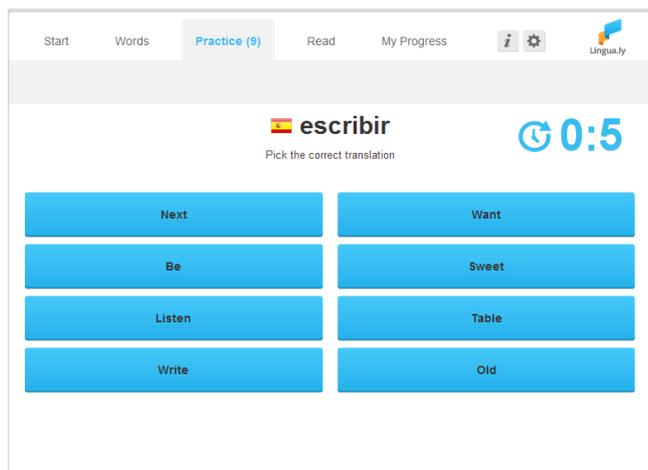


Figure 14. Timed vocabulary test in Lingua.ly.

If after three seconds you have not clicked on the correct answer then four incorrect ones are removed thus making your choice easier. You may track your progress in terms of completed tests and the number of words collected and read.

Lingua.ly is currently only available in the five languages listed above although there are plans to increase this number.

IV. LEARNING THROUGH WIKIS

A wiki is a website that is in a continuous state of development by its users, all of whom are able to edit or add content. The best-known example of a wiki is Wikipedia, a vast encyclopaedic resource written by the users for the users that can be consulted in 287 different languages on virtually any topic under the sun. Most wikis, however, are far more modest in size and serve a wide range of more specific purposes.

In the case of language learning, wikis have been used at all levels for a number of years, often on an experimental basis. They are easy to create, and also easy to edit as there is generally no need to learn HTML. In my institution, University College London, for example, there are three language learning wikis that I am aware of: The Hitchhiker's Guide to Danish Grammar, Bridge to Norway⁹ and Bridge to China.¹⁰ While the first is not normally available to people outside the institution, it is possible to access both Bridge to Norway and Bridge to China even if you do not have a UCL log-in. In what follows I intend to focus on the latter of these.

A. Bridge to China

Bridge to China is a free resource aimed at intermediate learners; it has been in existence since September 2012 and continues to be actively developed. Resources that are currently available consist of a dictionary containing all words used on the site and a "Three a Day" list of characters (both in relatively early stages of development); besides these, there are well developed sections containing conversations, grammar, pronunciation and texts. Instructions on use and on how to edit the wiki are also included, as is a list of tasks that currently

⁹ <https://wiki.ucl.ac.uk/display/ScanStuds/Norwegian>

¹⁰ www.bridgetochina.org.uk

need to be undertaken to continue to develop the website. While these materials already represent an excellent resource for the learner of Mandarin it is eventually envisaged that it will become a complete course for intermediate learners of Mandarin. The site is very largely the work of a single academic assisted by a small team of Mandarin native speakers and an artist, all of whom contribute on a voluntary basis.

By way of illustration, the following three figures show some examples of the kinds of resource that the website provides.

Firstly, Fig. 15 shows an extract from the "Vocab and notes" that follows one of the conversations:

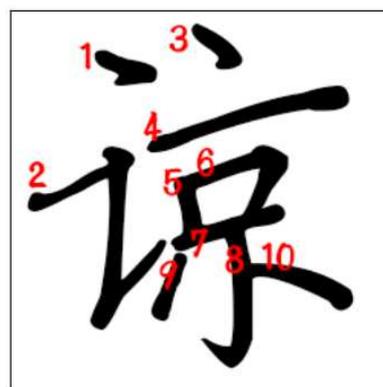
你学中文多久了? Nǐ xué zhōngwén duō jiǔle? 'How long have you been learning Chinese?'
 多久 duō jiǔ 'how long' (Note how time duration comes after the verb.) The 了 le at the end of this sentence implies that the action is continuing, cf. English 'have been ...ing'.
 大概三年了吧。 Dàgài sān nián le ba. 大概 Dàgài 'about'. The 吧 ba indicates uncertainty.
 能 néng 'can'
 真不容易。 Zhēn bù róngyì. 'That's quite something.'
 你都是自学的啦? Nǐ dōu shì zìxué de la? 'Have you done it all by self study?' 的 De adds a matter-of-fact tone. 啦 La = 了 le + 啊 a
 如果遇到不懂的, 我就... rúguǒ yùdào bù dǒng de, wǒ jiù... 'if I meet something I don't understand, I (then)...'. 遇到 Yùdào is a [result complement].
 他们都非非常愿意帮我。 Tāmen dōu fēicháng yuànyì bāng wǒ. 'They're all very willing to help me.'
 那你能读和写吗? Nà nǐ néng dú hé xiě ma? 'So you can read and write?'

Figure 15. Extract from the "Vocab and notes" that follow a conversation.

This section provides pinyin transcriptions and detailed explanations of all non-elementary grammar points, some of which are linked to the relevant points in the grammar section. As elsewhere in the wiki and as is standard for a wiki if a user happens to spot a mistake it can be corrected on the spot by the person who notices it.

Bridge to China offers its users three characters a day; as a way of aiding memorisation these are normally linked in some way. Fig. 16 shows how each new character is presented:

谅 Liàng is 'understand, forgive':



Common word: 原谅 yuánliàng 'forgive'

Figure 16. Explanation of a Chinese character.

This conveys the shape of the character, its meaning, the stroke order (as well as the starting-point of each stroke) and a common word in which it appears.

Finally, Fig. 17 shows how it is possible to use the editing interface to implement alterations or to add new text or resources:

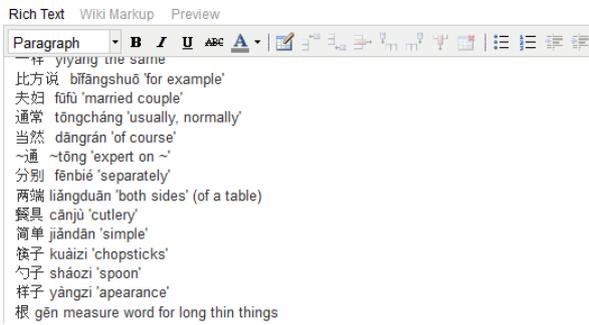


Figure 17. The Bridge to China editing interface.

Any changes made go live immediately. In this way the community of users can incrementally improve the learning resources – some by adding new materials, others by correcting any errors that there may be. In this way, even for the self-taught learner the learning process becomes much more active and even creative, rather than being a purely passive pursuit. What is interesting about this approach is that in this way the distinction between teacher and learner becomes somewhat blurred as a) any user can apply to become an editor and can contribute something or other and b) everybody involved in the project is aiming to learn from it. Indeed, all participants can potentially derive a benefit: not only those aiming to learn Mandarin but also native speakers of the language who gain an opportunity to meet and interact with new people during their time at UCL, have the opportunity to get their English corrected and have the chance to learn more about how their own language works.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Many technologies that could have been described in this paper have not been covered; these would include for example e-mail, Skype, blogs and Facebook.

It is of course highly unlikely that a particular approach could be found that tied in with most or all of the principles discussed in Section I, but on the other hand it is also doubtful that any language learner would wish to be using multiple different approaches at the same time. On the other hand, most of the principles have been addressed by at least one of the approaches discussed.

The extent to which the approaches that have been examined correlate with the principles presented in Section I is shown in Table I. As it turns out, it is principles two and four that are most clearly facilitated by the new approaches showcased, and these concern matters of motivation and arguably the kind of working routine that they are best suited to. As was pointed out at the beginning of Section III the three apps presented in that section focus most clearly on learning new words and other items. Five of the principles are not in fact covered at all, although these are some of the ones that are more passive or attitudinal (numbers three, ten and twelve) or alternatively that require active engagement in real communicative situations or environments (numbers nine and

TABLE I. CORRELATION BETWEEN APPROACHES AND PRINCIPLES

Principle	Think a Link	Substituting	Anki	Duolingo	Lingually	Bridge to China
1 Survival kit			x			
2 Motivation	x	x	x	x	x	x
3 What you need the language for						
4 Little and often	x	x	x	x	x	x
5 Test yourself on new words			x	x	x	
6 Try to recall words			x	x	x	
7 Learn words in categories			x	x		
8 Mnemonics	x					
9 Consciously use newly learnt words						
10 Curiosity						
11 Consciously plug gaps			x			x
12 Visualise likely situations						
13 Keep a record of your progress			x	x	x	
14 Learn to talk about yourself			x			
15 New words: basic vocab and interests			x			
16 Start reading real texts		x		x	x	
17 Surf the web				x	x	
18 Suitable texts to tackle		x			x	
19 Paraphrasing		x				
20 Use all possible stimuli						

twenty). The use of wikis is in many ways a completely new departure as it allows the learner to learn by helping to produce language learning material.

Quite clearly, the new approaches that have been presented can help with very many of the activities involved in language learning. On the other hand, the principles themselves appear to remain just as valid now as they were before the advent of the new technologies with all the exciting possibilities that they provide.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amara (n.d.). *Amara – caption, translate, subtitle and transcribe video*. Available: <http://www.amara.org>.
- [2] Duffy, J. (2013). *Best free language learning apps*. Available: <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2414314,00.asp>.
- [3] Elmes, D. (n.d.). *Anki – powerful, intelligent flashcards*. Available: <http://ankisrs.net>.
- [4] Henry, A. (2013). *Five best language learning tools*. Available: <http://lifehacker.com/five-best-language-learning-tools-1448103513>.
- [5] Pindrops1, 1920slover, Lojjik Braugler, Teresa et al. (n.d.). *How to add subtitles to Youtube videos*. Available: <http://www.wikihow.com/Add-Subtitles-to-YouTube-Videos>.
- [6] Zach (2013). *The best language learning apps you'll ever find*. Available: <http://languageholics.com/the-best-language-learning-apps-youll-ever-find>.



Mark Shuttleworth holds an Honours degree in Russian and German (1986) and a Diploma in Slavonic Studies (1987) from the University of Oxford, a Masters in Special Applications of Linguistics from the University of Birmingham (1993) and a PhD in Translation Studies from the University of London (2013), the topic of which was “Metaphor in Translation: A Multilingual Investigation into Language Use at the Frontiers of Scientific Knowledge”.

He has had a life-long passion for languages. Before embarking on his university career he taught languages at secondary school level in the UK. He has been involved in training translators since 1996, first at the University of Leeds, then at Imperial College London and now since October 2013 at University College London where he works as a Senior Lecturer. During this time he has launched and run two highly successful Masters programmes in translation and has become an established PhD supervisor. Perhaps best known for his *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997; Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004; Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005 in Chinese translation), he is the author of numerous academic papers on

translation technology, metaphor in translation and other translation-related topics and has spoken at industry events such as Translating and the Computer and the annual conferences of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting and the Association of Translation Companies.

Dr Shuttleworth is a Fellow of the UK Chartered Institute of Linguists; he is a member of a number of editorial boards. He is a fluent speaker of Russian, German, Polish and French and has some knowledge of a number of other languages. Most recently he has been trying to learn Mandarin Chinese.