



FOCUS ON SELECTED CURRENT INTERNET LANGUAGE FORUMS

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Abstract

The article deals with the evaluation of the Internet language forums. Internet forums are a phenomenon of today's Internet communication and are applied in many fields or interests, including languages. They can be helpful not only for learners who can find a lot of information through this source, but also for highly trained teachers, who can observe and analyze many various linguistic issues. The article tends to introduce the most visited and productive language forums available on the Internet and to provide an overview of their structure.

Key words: Internet, language forum, sub-forum

Nowadays one can hardly imagine using information technologies, concretely a computer, without the Internet. It has long been known that the Internet is one of the most used tools not only for learners, but teachers as well. It is a source of unlimited materials for teaching practically all language skills, vast sets of exercises for self-learners, and of course, it is also a way of productive communication through various so-called Internet forums. One may mistake this term with a term 'social network' or 'social networking site', but it is necessary to differentiate between these two. So what is an Internet forum? A web site that provides an online exchange of information between people about a particular topic. It provides a venue for questions and answers (Ziff Davis, Inc., 2011 (a)).

In contrast to this term, a social networking site is defined as 'a web site that provides a virtual community for people to share their daily activities with family and friends, or to share their interest in a particular topic, or to increase their circle of acquaintances' (Ziff Davis, Inc., 2011 (b)).

It is undeniable that teaching / learning language is an interactive process. However, due to some reasons teachers and learners do not always have the possibility to involve in this interaction process or, better said, they always have the possibility to get into the



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interaction in a little different way than a traditional teacher-learner interaction. Thanks to the Internet and a number of logged-on participants they can receive a feedback in a relatively short time. Of course, this can not be compared to a full-value face-to-face interaction, nor should it be considered as a substitution, but we must accept the fact that a non-personal communication is becoming more and more significant in all aspects of our lives and this fact must therefore be accepted in language learning and teaching, too.

There are a few Internet language forums which learners and teachers can participate in. However, many of them are quite tightly-oriented, too 'private' or not sophisticated enough to recommend them to potential users. A useful and productive Internet forum (language one or any other) should integrate certain aspects or qualities which make the forum universal or, following linguistic purposes we can say, international. It is expectable that the more professionally structured the forum (website) looks, the more relevant and educated users probably join it. Consequently, the feedback as well as the relevancy may be at a higher level, though we must take into account the shortcoming of Internet forums – some 'virtual irresponsibility' for one's contributions, what can considerably lower or degrade the erudition of a language forum (or any forum eventually); but this is something we must cope with if we want to accept the Internet and specialized Internet forums as a serious source of knowledge.

Evaluating the forums

Investigating present-day Internet forums we can encounter only a few which can be characterized as universal or international from the point of view of their usefulness for learners and teachers. We have selected three of them, apparently the most visited, which can be highly recommended for learners and teachers. We evaluated their structure, which is the most crucial attribute of any Internet forum underlying its visit rate. A well structured website lawfully captures more visitors in the course of time and this is evident also in the case of the investigated forums.

The following language forums are the object of our investigation:

- *www.unilang.org*
- *forum.wordreference.com*



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- forum.thefreedictionary.com

Each meets the requirements of the Internet *universality* and *internationality*, but they differ considerably in their structures. The main attribute of these requirements is a language used as the user's language, or technically more correctly – *interface language*. Since English is the international language, each forum meets this requirement. Nevertheless, the users also use their native language in discussions, if a section for that language is present. In contrast to using English as the international language, this is actually the requirement of universality or some 'cultural tolerance' (which we should definitely be aware of), too. Everyone, though not speaking English and still wanting to participate in the forum, has this possibility.

The structure of the forums should be regarded from the point of view of two aspects – linguistic and cultural. Since language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality (Kramsch, 2001), these two aspects are and must definitely be tightly related in human interaction (whether personal or non-personal). They should similarly be recognized in language forums as a form of human interaction, where the presence of cultural differences is felt even stronger due to many nationalities of participants within one interactive platform. In relation to the forums we can understand this cultural aspect in its broadest sense - including not only what lies in the definition of culture from a linguistic viewpoint, but actually every dimension of everyday life - art, religion, politics etc. These all are and can be discussed in the forums.

In all the three forums we can see that the linguistic aspect includes common issues connected with grammar, terminology, correct writing, translation etc. These have a main priority and are structured and used on a similar basis in the forums. However, investigating the cultural aspects of the forums we encounter quite remarkable differences in the hierarchy of priorities.

To provide an intelligible image about the structure of the forums, we worked out a table (Table 1) showing the forums' focus on individual linguistic and cultural aspects. To achieve this, we used all the sections (sub-forums) of all the three forums. If some sections of the investigated forums are identical or similar in their focuses, we designated the section in the table according to a more expressive heading in the respective forum.



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We should be aware of the fact that having a more complicated structure does not necessarily mean that the forum is better in some aspects. Each of them has its favorers due to subjective reasons. One may prefer a more simple structure to a complicated arrangement, one may need a well-arranged structure providing individual sections of interests etc. Eventually, a participant can discuss whatever he/she wants relating to languages and culture in all the three forums - if not in the individual section, it is possible in the superior or generalized one.

Table 1 Structure of investigated language forums

Focus on	<i>unilang.org</i>	<i>forum.wordreference.com</i>	<i>forum.thefreedictionary.com</i>
<i>General Language Subforum</i>	✓		
<i>Language-specific Subforum</i>	✓	✓	✓
Grammar	•	✓	✓
Vocabulary (Terminology)	•	✓	✓
Translation issues	✓	•	•
Scripts and Writing Systems	✓	•	•
Etymology and History of Languages	•	✓	•
<i>Culture</i>	✓	✓	✓
Nation differences	•	•	•



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Literature	✓	•	• ✓ (EN)
Politics	•	•	• ✓ (EN)
Business	•	•	• ✓ (EN)
Music	•	•	•
Religion	•	•	• ✓ (EN)
Philosophy	•	•	• ✓ (EN)
Law	•	•	• ✓ (EN)
Medicine	•	•	• ✓ (EN)
Science and Technology	•	•	• ✓ (EN)
Language / Word Games			• ✓ (EN)

✓ - standalone section (subforum); • - can be discussed within respective theme-related standalone sections;
 (EN) –standalone sections only for English language

Conclusion

Language forums can be utilized in many ways. Most commonly they can serve as a supplement to ordinary dictionaries, especially when analyzing phrases, idioms, informal expressions etc. which can't normally be found in ordinary dictionaries. A language forum is probably one of the quickest ways how to deal with these linguistic 'items' interactively. To illustrate the authenticity and 'intercultureness' of such a language forum interaction we picked out one funny 'real life' contribution of an American living in the Czech Republic, asking for the explanation of signs '*slevy jako prase*' on shop banners in one street in Prague. He could not understand why the discounts in the Prague



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shop should have something to do with pigs. He would have hardly found the explanation of this recent slang comparison of Czech informal language in ordinary dictionaries. This is just one of the vast number of examples how the forum members can approach an explanation of certain terms, with which we would probably have difficulties searching in more standard sources. However, the correctness of the rendered explanations can not be guaranteed and taken for granted – especially for linguistically educated users. In that case, the forums provide at least a very good jumping-off point for the verification.

References

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