

FARMINGTON -- Marilyn Shea has relied on potent pots of coffee to keep her awake during long sessions in front of her computer screen at the University of Maine at Farmington.

Shea, however, uses her computer for tasks other than studying for finals, because she's a psychology professor who uses her mouse to fine-tune what has become the go-to Web site for learning language.

Known as Ting, which means "to listen" in Mandarin Chinese, the site offers audio clips of thousands of words and phrases being spoken in both English and Chinese. Some entries in the dictionary have as many as seven audio clips, each featuring different speakers.

Some who lent their voices to the Web project speak slowly and articulate clearly, pronouncing each word with painstaking perfection, like the skilled actors on the foreign-language tapes tourists buy before heading abroad.

Most, however, do not speak slowly and clearly -- a point of which Shea is particularly proud.

After all, it was her own frustrations with those eerily intelligible voices on Chinese language learning tapes before her first trip to China in 1992 that led her to create the user-friendly site.

"Those tape recordings drove me nuts," she admitted. "I wanted real people, embarrassed people, fast people, inarticulate people. People that you'd actually encounter on the streets of China."

She began developing the site in 1996, striving to create an online space where users around the world could log on and learn at their own pace.

Ten years later, Ting (<http://hua.umf.maine.edu/Chinese/welcome.html>) is registering 1.8 million hits per month, representing about 70,000 users from 50 countries. Shea has traveled to China multiple times to record the voices of 40 students and faculty friends in Beijing.

In Farmington, her team records English words and phrases for the Chinese people who are trying to learn English and who account for 12 percent of the site's hits.

Ting is in a league of its own on the World Wide Web. While other sites also feature audio, Shea said many have computer-generated voices that are not realistic.

Given the amount of work that has gone into the project, Shea admitted with a laugh she isn't surprised that there aren't others.

With help from work-study students at UMF, the site has expanded to include games, maps, an animated program that teaches numbers, vocabulary quizzes, downloadable flash cards and even the fairy tale "Snow White" read in Chinese or English complete with drawings.

A program designed by student Mike Hughes -- an adaptation to the popular children's game Simon Says -- will launch this summer. Visitors to the site will see animated characters act out the words that are spoken.

"Knowing that people are actually using this thing that I am putting so much time into is very gratifying," said Victor Cavendish Goes, a student programmer for the project. "You can learn while you are having fun. This human-computer interface is an example of how technology can really help people learn."

Language learners who stumbled across the site can't believe their good fortune -- to find such a site with myriad services that are all offered for free. The online guest book is packed with pronouncements of appreciation for Shea and her team that proclaim Ting is everything from "awesome" to "a must bookmark."

Students on the project chuckle as they recall walking by Shea's office in the middle of the night and seeing the glow of her screen. Lennie Goff said the site is to Shea what basketball is to Michael Jordan and Microsoft is to Bill Gates. A passion. An obsession.

Shea sees it as a responsibility -- a way of making a contribution to an online world that has taught her so much and a way to further others' understanding and affection for a culture that is so rich.

Shea does it all without monetary benefit, spending as much as 40 hours per week working on the site. The heart of the Internet is communication, she said, and the commercial aspect of the Web shouldn't take away from its true purpose -- a forum where ideas are freely exchanged.

"You just get a kick out of knowing it works," she said. "I think this is just the beginning and I'd love to see how it turns out."

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