

Guiding EFL Learners In The Use Of Web Resources

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Abstract

This paper describes a method of using World Wide Web resources as authentic materials in an EFL reading class. Forty-eight students enrolled in a reading class were guided in the use of websites for language learning through completing and creating scavenger hunt-type of assignments using websites that were not specifically designed for language learning. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and evaluation of students' work. They revealed that despite the amount of time needed to complete the assignments, the students' attitude towards using websites to complete English assignments was generally positive. They also became more web literate during the process of completing the assignments, especially when they collaborated to create a reading assignment using sites of their own selection.

Introduction

"The Internet has been increasingly considered as a pedagogical tool by which one can create innovative language experiences for L2 teachers and learners" (Lee, 1997). The World Wide Web has unique qualities that make it a suitable tool for foreign language learning. It is a rich database of authentic material in English that grows exponentially at a rapid rate. The visually engaging documents on the Web cover a range of subjects and are linked to other related documents. They have multimedia capabilities and interactive functions making them an attractive medium to conduct instruction (Li & Hart, 1996). Meloni (1998) suggests that among the reasons for using the Web in ESL learning are increased student motivation, authentic language, and global awareness.

The literature on how to harness this huge collection of resources for language learning has been expanding in the past few years (see Boswood, 1997; Felix, 1999; Sperling, 1997; Warschauer, 1995; Warschauer et al, 2000). Recent research reports also offer encouraging results in the use of the Internet. For example, Kung and Chuo (2002) found that college students in Taiwan consider websites on the Internet designed for ESL/EFL students to be useful in supplementing in-class instruction. Their study also confirmed the need to guide students in the use of Internet resources through introductions to selected websites and homework assignments. Ellinger and colleagues (2001) used the Web in an English for Academic Purposes reading program in Israel and concluded that "the Internet gives our students choices about what they read, provides access to topics relevant to them, and involves them in purposeful activities. All of these create the motivation which is essential to foreign language learning" (p. 24-25). Oliva and Pollastrini (1995) used a combination of Internet tools in a virtual immersion program in Italian. Osuna and Meskill (1998) and Lee (1997) integrated websites and other Internet tools to enhance the teaching and learning of Hispanic culture. The latter reported finding

that Internet resources and e-mail increased students' interest and motivation to learn the target language and culture in a dynamic rather than a passive way. Felix (2001) conducted a large scale study in four settings investigating the potential of Web as medium of language instruction. The advantages perceived were time flexibility, reinforced learning, privacy, and wealth of information. Sixty-five percent of the participants found the Web useful for language learning.

However, using the Internet is not without its problems. Among the barriers to the application of the Internet in the classroom are the reliability of the information on the Web, the cost of the equipment needed to connect to the Internet, inequality of access between the more and less economically advantaged, and frustrating slow connections (Lyman, 1998; Sussex & White, 1996; Warschauer, 2000). Other negative responses reported by students using the Internet for language learning include varying degrees of disorientation and cognitive overload (Yang, 2001). Depending on how the Internet is used, the disadvantages could also be distraction, absence of teacher and personal interaction, and lack of speaking practice (Felix, 2001).

“Despite the abundance of resources on the Internet, those resources are not likely to be useful unless the students can locate them and know how to use them to enhance their language learning experience” (Kung & Chuo, 2002, p. 2). Li and Hart (1996) believe that intermediate-level learners are the audience who can benefit most immediately from Web-based materials. Task-oriented research activities in the form of online scavenger hunts are a stimulating way to use search tools. (Warschauer, Schetzer, & Meloni, 2000). However, Egbert (2001) advises against having students do research that requires more time looking for resources than focusing on reading or writing. Exposure, in itself, is not helpful unless it is accompanied by active processing of the material. The researcher, therefore, decided to design a series of activities to guide her students in finding and using the resources available wisely. It is worth noting that among all the online resources, the only ones used for this project were reference or informational websites not specifically designed for language instruction. The specific questions under investigation were:

1. What are the students' present online reading habits?
2. Do students think it is appropriate to use Web assignments in a reading class?
3. What do students feel they have gained from doing Web assignments?
4. What problems and difficulties do students encounter when attempting the Web assignments?

Methodology

Participants & Context

The participants were a class of 48 (8 male, 40 female) students majoring in English at a college of languages in Southern Taiwan. The mother tongue of all of the students was

Mandarin Chinese and their ages ranged from 20 to 25. They had between an intermediate high to advanced low proficiency level and are currently in their junior year in college. At the time of this research project, they were taking three required English courses: Public Speaking, Listening, and Reading. This project was implemented in the students' year-long reading course. The reading class sought to guide students in critically analyzing essays on contemporary issues, identifying main and supporting ideas in these essays, coherently expressing their opinions in spoken and written English, recognizing the organization of the essays read, correctly deducing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary from context, and developing Web literacy skills.

Procedure

The students were given four assignments that required the use of the sites on the World Wide Web. Students had to practice online navigation and research skills and comprehend information found at the sites in order to complete the assignments.

The first assignment required students to work with the Bartleby.com website (www.bartleby.com) in a scavenger hunt-type activity that familiarized them with this collection of online reference texts and demonstrated the efficiency of electronic searching. Bartleby.com contains many of the most commonly used reference books such as thesauri, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, books of phrases and quotations.

The second assignment required students to search for information in the International Movie Database. The International Movie Database (www.imdb.com) is a source of authentic material that would appeal to most teenage and adult students of English as a foreign language. It contains biographies of stars, plots of movies, famous quotations, cast information, records of awards received by films, and commentaries by viewers. While the previous exercise could have been easily completed with keyword searches, skimming and scanning, this assignment required more careful reading and interpreting.

The third assignment asked students to use search engines to find interesting Websites written by native speakers of English for a general English-speaking audience. (See Appendix 1) Students were to look for sites they could use to prepare for the TOEFL exam, sources of online news, and sites containing information about some aspect of Chinese culture. They were to find out who created the sites and had to justify their recommendation of a particular site. Following the completion of this assignment, the students shared the sites with each other and discussed the timeliness and reliability of the content on websites. Other issues discussed in class included purpose, authorship and perspective of websites. This led to the formulation of a set of criteria to evaluate Web content. Students were also taught the meaning of domain names and the editorial process that other mass media are subject to but the Web is not.

The fourth and last assignment asked students to select an interesting and reliable website and create a Web assignment for other students in the class. The students could build on the results of the previous assignment by using a website they had found. The students were told that the assignments ought to be an interesting challenge for someone who had the same English ability as the students themselves. They could follow the format of

assignments they had completed and could use true or false, multiple choice, matching, or short answer questions. They were to hand in the questions and answers to the instructor and bring two extra copies of the assignment that would be given to two classmates to complete. After the two classmates had completed the assignments, the student author compared the classmates' answers with his or her "correct" answers. Then all three students who worked on the assignment (the author and two reviewers) met to discuss errors or misunderstandings, so that the final copy handed in would be clear, complete, and have no grammatical errors. The class met in the computer lab the day they discussed the assignments they made for each other and the authors handed in a final revised assignment with the answers a week later.

All four assignments were collected in sequence two weeks after they were handed out. A questionnaire was given to the students in class on the day the last assignment was collected. No identifying information was asked of the students. The teacher/researcher left the room when the students completed the questionnaire and a student volunteer collected them. All the assignments were marked, returned to the students, and discussed in class after the students completed the questionnaire

Semi-structured interviews with groups of two or three students were conducted during the weeks when the students were completing the assignments. These served to get a sense of how the students were progressing and the difficulties they might be encountering.

The questionnaire contained multiple choice items, Likert-scale-type items and short answer questions. Some items were stated in the negative sense to give a balance to the questionnaire. The students were questioned regarding:

- their online reading habits before doing web assignments;
- their view of web assignments;
- difficulties and problems encountered when completing the web assignments;

Findings & Discussion

Students' Online Reading Habits

A great majority of the students indicated spending over five hours on line per week. As Figure 1 indicates, 53% of the students spend on average more than five hours on line, 20% spend between three and five hours, and 18% spend one to three hours. Students mostly browse websites in their native Chinese even though they were English majors and had enough knowledge of English to understand most of the websites. Forty percent or less of the content on the websites browsed by two thirds of the class was in English. Three quarters of the students reported that more than sixty percent of what they read on line was in Chinese. These findings suggested that despite their ample online experience, students visit websites in English infrequently. On being asked the reasons, they claimed

unfamiliarity with good sites or lack of knowledge about how to use them. Some even claimed never having thought about using sites in English.

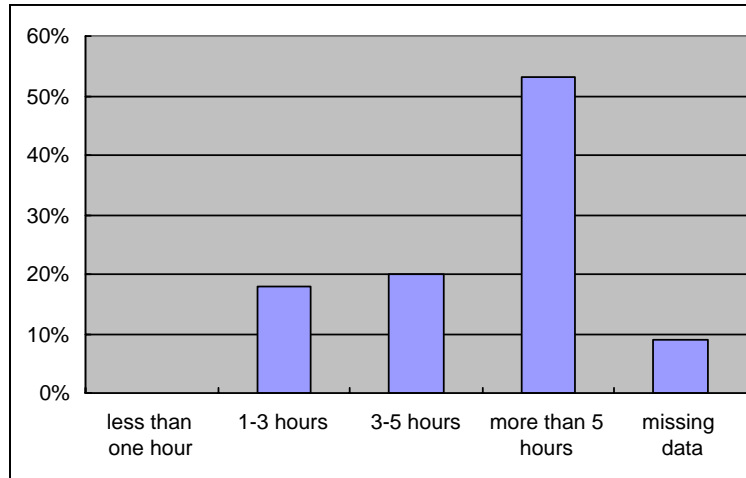


Figure 1. Average number of hours spent on line per week.

Reactions towards web assignments

The assignments were described as “interesting,” “helpful,” “innovative,” “challenging”, “time-consuming” and “difficult.” Students had generally positive reactions towards the web assignments. The results of the survey indicated that 64% of the students viewed the assignments as worthwhile and no one thought that they were not worthwhile. The rest were not sure. The majority of the respondents (62%) found the assignments interesting while 9% did not. Seventy-one percent of the students thought that web assignments were beneficial for learning English. As table 1 shows, the majority of the students thought that Web assignments could help them learn new vocabulary and improve their reading skills. The students generally did not find the assignments difficult. Forty-eight percent said they disliked doing the Web assignments while 11% said they liked them. An overwhelming 89% admitted that they found useful resources on the Web by completing the assignments and 20% even said that they would like the teacher to give more assignments. Table 1 summarises students’ reactions towards web assignments.

Table 1. Students' reactions towards the web assignments.

	Disagree	Not sure	Agree
Web assignments are worthwhile assignments to do in reading class	0%	36%	64%
Web assignments are interesting.	9%	29%	62%
Web assignments are NOT beneficial for learning English.	71%	22%	7%
Web assignments can help me learn new vocabulary.	2%	29%	69%
Web assignments can help me improve my reading skills.	2%	41%	56%
Web assignments can help me with my writing.	7%	53%	40%
Web assignments are difficult.	49%	40%	11%
I have become a better searcher of online information after completing Web assignments.	5%	47%	48%
I dislike doing Web assignments.	48%	36%	16%
By completing Web assignments, I found useful resources on the Web.	7%	4%	89%
I would like my teacher to give more web assignments next semester.	40%	40%	20%

Some positive and negative comments were:

- “As I struggled looking for the answers, I disliked this assignment; however, after completing all the question given by teacher, I gained a lot of knowledge from the website and became more familiar with websites in English.”
- “The assignments were very difficult at first and somewhat annoying, but after completing them... I felt relieved and fulfilled in a way.”
- “At the beginning, I didn't like doing web assignments. Then I found a useful web site and felt that the homework was worth doing.”
- “I had a hard time! I got tired of looking for one good site and make questions.”
- “I didn't like doing this. I prefer going to a website I like with no pressure.”
- “I needed to spend so much time on it.”

Perceptions towards what was gained

Major themes that emerged from a qualitative analysis of the data included finding useful websites, learning to search data on line, and improving reading skills. Some students said that they gained vocabulary and knowledge and now surf more English websites. Others said that they can tell which sites are better. The following are some student comments:

- “Making web assignment can help me read faster and know more information.”
- “I got more experience looking for information online and I can distinguish which sources are more reliable and better. Also, I found that my online reading speed improved.”
- “After searching for the most suitable site, I did learn new knowledge and found new treasures.”
- “I know one more, two more, and many websites I can use to find more information now. And I think they will help me a lot when I am doing my assignments in the future.”

Difficulties encountered

Almost all the students said that they spent a lot of time doing the web assignments. Close to the entire class spent on average more than two hours on each assignment. The last assignment took some students more than five hours. A few indicated that staring at a computer too long hurt their eyes and that they had trouble understanding some of the questions in the assignments. Some did not have computers in their homes and had to go to Internet cafés; it was therefore inconvenient to complete the assignments. It is interesting to point out that one student thought it was strange having to go to an Internet café to do homework. This might be a reflection of the perceived activities appropriate in these popular places in Taiwan.

Other predictable barriers that students encountered had to do with the difficulty of the content on the websites and the difficulty of the assignments themselves. Students said:

- “It is hard to find a good web site to make a web assignment.”
- “The web site filled with English; sometimes it is not easy to find the answers.”
- “There are lots of vocabularies I don’t know.”
- “Once I could not find the answer immediately. I had to spend lots of time finding the answer.”

Lessons learned from the web assignments

The instructor was overwhelmingly surprised at the quality of the assignments that the students produced. Some very interesting sites were found and ingenious questions were created. The products are very good examples of working in cooperation with each other. (See Appendix 4 for an example.) Being placed in the role of author and reviewer gave students further insight into how the assignments were to be created to match the language ability and interest of their intended audience. Some remarks regarding this assignment were “making the web assignment has more challenges than answering it,” “I am afraid that making questions that difficult for classmates to find the answers,” and “I think it an interesting assignment to complete; I pretended I were a teacher while doing

the web assignment”.

The collaborative effort helped student become aware of the importance of asking clear unambiguous questions. There were many heated discussions when answers expected by the authors of the assignments were different from the answers given by the reviewers. One group also discovered the lack of permanence of web pages when the reviewers “got all the answers wrong.” The author had chosen a news-type website which changed its content every week. When it was time for the reviewers to complete the assignment, all the answers were different even though the questions were still valid.

The series of assignments used in this project followed guidelines proposed by Grabinger and Dunlap’s (1996) for active learning:

- Student responsibility and initiative to promote ownership of e-learning and transferable skills;
- Intentional learning strategies, explicit methods of learning, reflection on learning processes, metacognitive skills;
- Goal-driven, problem-solving tasks and projects generating learning products of value;
- Instructors as facilitators, coaches and guides, not sources of knowledge, requiring discussion between instructors and learners;
- Authentic contexts for learning, anchored in real-world problems;
- Authentic assessment strategies to evaluate real-world skills; and
- Cooperative learning.

The bulk of the negative reactions stemmed from the time it took to complete the assignments. This problem could be solved by reducing the number of items in them. Some negative responses might also be due to the fact that all the assignments were done as homework which was in addition to preparation work students needed to do for class. The teacher assigned new essays almost every week and always gave quizzes before starting in-class discussions.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that despite the variety of resources available to them on the World Wide Web, many EFL students do not use websites in their language learning process. They need to be guided in using and finding useful resources. They also need to become aware that not all content on the Web is of equal value. This web literacy unit in an advanced-level EFL class aimed at providing students with the skills they need to use the Web judiciously. Evaluation of this unit showed that students above an intermediate level of English ability can use them for language learning through carefully designed increasingly more intellectually demanding assignments. The students found the web

assignments worthwhile, interesting, and beneficial for learning English. They also thought that they were able to find useful resources and learn new vocabulary through completing the web assignments.

This project also highlighted the importance of modelling, scaffolding, and asking probing questions in the process of knowledge construction. It also underscored the value of cooperative work. The teacher was surprised at the quality of some of the assignments that the students were able to create using general-purpose websites as content. (See Appendix 2).

Ninety-seven percent of the respondents to a survey conducted by Starr and Milheim (1996) believed that the Internet would have a positive effect on instruction. However, only 40% of them found a viable means of doing so. This leads to the conclusion that the field is still in search of innovative ways to use Internet resources. This study offered a practical way of using Internet resources for foreign language learning. Warschauer (2000) once proposed that new information technologies would transform notions of literacy, making on-line navigation and research as well as interpretation of hypermedia critical skills for learners of English. As their teachers, we should help them acquire these skills and continue to look for innovative ways to use technology to enrich the learning experience of our students.

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Biodata

Shiao-Chuan Kung received her Ed.D. in Instructional Technology and Media from Teachers' College, Columbia University. Presently, she is an Instructional Designer at Hunter College of the City University of New York where she helps faculty members integrate technology effectively into their teaching.

Appendix 1

Looking for Useful Sites

Web Assignment 3—Looking for Useful Sites

1. Find two sites that a student of English as a foreign language can use to enhance his or her learning experience. Write down the URL of the sites and describe their content.
2. Where on the Web can we find information on the TOEFL exam? Find a site that offers information, advice, and practice questions.
3. Where can I turn to if I'm looking at a Web site and need language help? Where is there an online translator?
4. Find the Web site for a museum, explore it thoroughly and report on the contents of the site.
5. Find the Web site for an international organization such as the United Nations or the WTO, explore it thoroughly and report on the contents of the site.
6. Find the Web site of a transnational commercial company that makes products you use, explore it briefly and report on the organization of the site.
7. Find a good source of current news on the Web. Why would you recommend this site?
8. Find a Web site that contains information about some aspect of the Chinese culture such as holidays or customs. Who is the publisher of the site? Is it a reliable source?
9. Find a site with information about a city abroad that you would like to visit. What kind of information does the site offer?
10. List all the search engines (English and/or Chinese) that you used for this assignment. Which ones were most helpful? Why?

Appendix 2

Sample Student-made Assignment

Great Buildings of the World

The Great Building Collection contains information about architects, buildings, and architectural styles. Fill in the blanks with information that can be found at <http://www.greatbuildings.com>.

1. The famous Sydney Opera House is an expressionist modern building. It was designed by _____ and was built from _____ to _____.
2. The emperor Shah Jahan of India built the Taj Mahal in Agra, the seat of the _____ Empire. He ordered the building constructed in honor of his _____.
3. The London Millennium Bridge was designed by the English architect _____ who also designed other famous buildings such as the _____ in Germany and _____ in Hong Kong.
4. The Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava designed the _____ Station. This modern style structure is made of _____ and _____.
5. Much to people's surprise now, the Eiffel Tower, originally designed by _____ for the _____ in Paris, did not delight the French at the time. It was considered an ugly monster.
6. Ieoh Ming Pei designed the _____ to serve as the new entrance to the Louvre Museum.
7. Casa Batllo, Casa Mila, Colonia Guell and Sagrada Familia were all designed by _____.
8. The _____, designed by Barma and Posnik, is famous for its eight colourful _____ and its _____ style.
9. _____, _____, and _____ are three modern architects.
10. _____, _____, and _____ are three examples of Art Nouveau architecture.

Answers

1. The famous Sydney Opera House is an expressionist modern building. It was designed by **Jorn Utzon** and was built from **1957** to **1973**.
2. The emperor Shah Jahan of India built the Taj Mahal in Agra, the seat of the **Mungal** Empire. He ordered the building constructed in honor of his **wife**.
3. The London Millennium Bridge was designed by the English architect **Norman Foster** who also designed other famous buildings such as the **Commerzbank Headquarters** in Germany and the **Chek Lap Kok Airport** in Hong Kong.
4. The Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava designed the **Stadlhofen Railway Station**. This modern style structure is made of **steel frames** and **glass**.
5. Much to people's surprise now, the Eiffel Tower, originally designed by **Gustave Eiffel** for the **1889 International Exhibition** in Paris, did not delight the French at the time. It was considered an ugly monster.
6. Ieoh Ming Pei designed the **Pyramide du Louvre** to serve as the new entrance to the Louvre Museum.
7. Casa Batllo, Casa Mila, Colonia Guell and Sagrada Familia were all designed by **Antonio Gaudi**.
8. The **Cathedral of St. Basil**, designed by Barma and Posnik, is famous for its eight colourful **onion domes** and its **Russian Byzantine** style.
9. **Alvar Aalto**, **Aldo van Eyck**, and **James Stirling** are three modern architects.
10. **Casa Mila**, **Behrens House**, and **Sezession House** are three examples of Art Nouveau architecture.