

The Internet and the EFL Classroom: An Integrative Approach for Teachers With Limited Resources

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Introduction

Bill Gates claimed that 1997 would be the year when the Internet would be recognized as an integral part of world culture. For 1998 he predicted that in ten years the Internet would be as important to our way of life as the car. For the year 1999 he remains optimistic that one day everyone on the planet will need the Internet to the point of not being able to live without it. Obviously, if that claim is to be taken seriously, we EFL teachers should be anxious to include activities involving the Internet as a part of our programs, curricula, and lesson-planning.

However, the rate at which the Internet is spreading outside of the United States, where most EFL teaching takes place, has not risen significantly enough to make that need pressing. Although statistics on the Internet itself vary significantly even for the United States, it is estimated that in the U.S. about 30% of the population is connected to the Internet. Although there are isolated countries that surpass this rate, such as Finland with 35% and Iceland with 45%, most countries have a much lower rate. There are places where the connectivity is rather uniform, such as Western Europe (Germany, 8.7%; France, 6%; Spain, 6.6%), areas where the rate is rather sporadic geographically, such as Asia (Japan, 11.1%; Taiwan 14.3%; China, 0.1%), and immense areas of sparse connectivity, such as South America and Africa, where the rate is truly negligible in most countries.* Institutional response to the Internet demand also mirrors the statistics

*All of these statistics can be found on the NUA Internet Surveys, <<http://www.nua.ie>>, which in turn are compiled from various other sources on the Internet. See: <http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/n_america.html>, <http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/europe.html>, <http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/asia.html>, <http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/s_america.html> <http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/africa.html>.

provided above. While many educational institutions in the U.S. are able to provide on-line computer facilities for their students, this is less true than other countries.

The Internet for Information

The Internet holds three main promises for English language teaching (ELT) professionals. It provides the medium for resources for EFL teachers, which otherwise would be difficult to locate. It provides users with the possibility of communication with other users, who would not otherwise come into contact. It also provides a wealth of information, which otherwise would be more difficult and time-consuming to find. However, ELT publications have concentrated mostly on the Internet as an ELT resource and the Internet as a communication device, while they have devoted little space to the use of Internet as an information-gathering tool. Also, most published didactic material involving the Internet in the EFL classroom, whether published on the Internet itself or paper-published, assumes an ideal teaching situation.

The *English Teaching Forum* and *TESOL Matters* now have columns in their publications dedicated to Internet resources for the ELT profession, called “online resources” and “Wandering the Web” respectively. There are now ELT publications available exclusively on the Internet such as the *Internet TESL Journal* <<http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/>>, or the *ELT Spectrum* <<http://www.oup.co.uk/elt>>. Recent articles in *The Language Teacher* and the *TESL Reporter* have also dealt with teachers’ resources on line (see Kluge 1996; 1997; McGuire, 1997; Newfields, 1996; Newfields and McGuire, 1997; Templin, 1998; Warschauer and Whittaker, 1997).*

However, few ELT publications deal with using the Internet for information collecting. I feel that this is the greatest possibility for EFL classroom applications of the Internet, because, as the term “information superhighway” unequivocally indicates, the Internet is a source of information. Information collected on the Web is more current, more visually stimulating, and available in greater amounts than information collected from traditional sources of information, such as encyclopedias, almanacs, dictionaries, and so on. Information-intensive curricula, programming, or lesson planning, such as content-based, task-based, or project-based teaching, are very promising areas for using the Internet as an information-gathering tool in the EFL classroom.

All didactic material that I have seen in recent publications assumes the ideal teaching situation in which all computers in a computer laboratory are connected to the Internet and students work either individually or in groups (see Hardisty and Windeatt, 1989).

*All except one of *The Language Teacher* articles are available on the Internet at *The Language Teacher Online* at: <<http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt>>

Although the availability of computer labs and the rate of Internet connection that they enjoy for many countries is less than ideal, EFL teachers are, nonetheless, anxious to accommodate current technological developments into their classrooms. They must have some means of responding to this new technology, while not excluding traditional sources of information from their programs and lessons.

The Internet as a Teaching Tool

There are five main ways to use the Internet for information-collection in the EFL classroom. First, the EFL teacher takes the entire class to the computer laboratory where there are a certain number of computer terminals for a certain number of students. This is the ideal situation that most ELT publications take for granted, but is actually more than an elusive dream for most EFL professionals. In this situation, students work individually, in pairs, or in groups on their terminals, which are connected to the Internet, which may be either controlled by the teacher, so that all students are using the same Web page and doing the same task with it, or, it could be uncontrolled, so that teachers give students a task and allow them to get the information they need with supervision (unless it is requested). This lesson or unit of work could also be semi-controlled, so that there would be either a balance between teacher-directed exercises and autonomous student work throughout the lesson, or so that part of the lesson would be controlled by the teacher and the other part of it uncontrolled.

The second method is by necessity a teacher-controlled exercise, but it could also be adapted to be semi-controlled. Since many computer labs in real teaching institutions can have no more than one telephone line connected to the Internet at one time, the Internet connection is limited to one computer. With a multimedia monitor projector the teacher operates the computer connected to the Internet while the students do the tasks using the information they see on the monitor, which is projected on the screen at the front of the computer lab. The teacher could allow the students to direct the Internet search in order to relinquish some of the control to the students, thereby making this a semi-controlled exercise. Without a monitor projector, the students would be forced to gather around the one computer that is connected, which would make the exercise more uncomfortable, but still useful.

The third way of using the Internet would be to have one computer connected to the Internet available in the classroom, just as most classrooms have a VCR and monitor, cassette player, or an OHP. That way, students could access the Internet by turns whenever the task they are doing requires information collection for which the Internet is ideally suited. This way of using the Internet is by nature uncontrolled.

The fourth method would be to have students do tasks or assignments for homework by using the Internet to collect their information. The teacher would ask them to collect information exclusively from the Internet rather than from traditional sources of information, such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, and so on. They would be asked to use the information for input into their task or assignment and hand in the work as they would for any other homework assignment.

Integrating the Internet in the EFL Classroom

All four of the above methods, while being solid pedagogically are often unrealistic logistically, especially in countries outside of the U.S., where the majority of EFL teaching takes place. In these places, therefore, a realistic method of integrating the Internet into the EFL classroom must be found. The following five points outline a fifth method for teachers to include the technological advances of the Internet as an information-gathering tool in the absence of Internet provision by the institution they serve. The following guidelines explain how to make use of those students who have Internet at home. These five points could be put into practice with any type of content-based, task-based, or project-based lesson or unit of work for which information collection is a basic ingredient.

a). Organize groups around those students in the course who have access to the Internet. How to find out who does and who does not may be established through questionnaires which seek to gather general information about the students. It is a good idea to always have your students fill out such a questionnaire no matter what type of course they are in. That way you can find out who plays musical instruments, who can speak other foreign languages, who comes from interesting places, and as an additional point, who has access to the Internet.

b). Make the Internet information-gathering compatible with traditional information-gathering. The information-gathering tasks in each group will be delegated according to the sources each student has available, whether they be dictionaries, encyclopedias, specialized books, CD ROM's, or Internet access. Outside the classroom, those who have access will search the Internet for information, while those who do not will gather their information traditionally. There will be a group opportunity during classtime to select which information, whether from the Internet or traditional sources, will provide the best basis for the final project.

c). Teach and practice Internet vocabulary. The students who have Internet will probably know a lot of vocabulary which is useful when doing a search, because most of the search engines and web pages are in English. Vocabulary practice exercises which use these students as a resource will allow all of the students to learn the items

and hopefully spark their interest in the Internet in general. The following ten key vocabulary items could be dealt with in gap-fill, multiple choice, or matching exercises:

- address (url, e-mail)
- click
- cursor (arrow, bar, hand)
- hypertext
- links
- print
- search
- scroll (up, down)
- web site/web pages
- world wide web (www)

A comparison of these words to the students' L1 is often in order to ensure comprehension. A simple check of which words they actually came across during their search would suffice as a follow-up exercise to consolidate the vocabulary.

d). Give them some url addresses to start with. For example, I usually give my students some addresses of search engines like Yahoo! <<http://www.yahoo.com>> or Altavista at <<http://www.altavista.com>>, and then some of the sites they might want to visit. For example, for a unit about movies, The Academy Awards is on line at <<http://www.oscar.com>> or <<http://www.oscars.org>>, or Twentieth Century Fox is at <<http://www.fox.com>>. Then the students can go directly from sites to links more easily. For uninitiated web users, a search often yields strange things that take some time to view and then turnout to be something totally unrelated to what they actually wanted to get. By clicking on links instead, the search could be made without using search engines except as a last resort. Of course, the material they come across should be printed, in order to share it with the other group members.

e). Allow the students plenty of time to compare the Internet printouts and photocopies from the traditional sources during class time. During the actual writing phase of the final project, students will select the material they want to incorporate into it and discard that which they do not. The Internet material is printed on paper just like the traditional material. This selection process will give those students who do not have access to the Internet a chance to see what is available on it and give the students who have access to the Internet a chance to see if they know how to efficiently get information of a quality similar to traditional encyclopedias, dictionaries, and the like.

Things to Keep in Mind

This series of guidelines assumes a minimum of knowledge on the part of the teacher as far as conducting information searches on the Internet is concerned. If you do not have much experience with search engines and websites, perhaps it is time you tried to do something about it. About 10 hours at the computer with a little help from someone more knowledgeable than yourself will suffice to acquire the know-how needed to apply these guidelines.

Much of the information on the world wide web is very commercial and each individual Internet user must determine what is valuable and what is not. That is often a skill which requires time in excess of what information tasks propose. If you suspect that your students are going to use the Internet information search to the detriment of other activities, try to make them aware that they should focus only on the work at hand. No apparatus will save time for anyone if it takes away time from other pleasures.

Teachers in countries where access is very low may need to make use of private Internet providers, which will mean that either students will have to pay the bill or that the program organizer will be willing to pay. The convincing is not always easy to do.

The Value of Internet Information-collection as a Learning Tool

The guidelines above make the Internet valuable as a learning tool, because it becomes an information-collecting tool for the EFL classroom, while not excluding traditional information from the classroom. The websites that the students will encounter on the Internet will most likely be in English and therefore constitute authentic reading material. In project-based, task-based, or content-based work, this authentic material will constitute the input on which the output exercise will be based. Comprehensible input is the basis on which language production competence rests (Krashen, 1983).

The method encourages skills transfer, both from productive to receptive skills, and from receptive to productive skills. The guidelines and nature of the classroom activity also encourage students to compare information from various sources and filter through it by selecting the best information for the students' present purposes, which translates into critical thinking skills. The incorporation of the Internet as an information-collecting tool to be assigned for use outside of the classroom triggers positive attitudinal response, because it offers an opportunity for individual expansion on classroom material. Also, the incorporation of Internet sources of information into the classroom offers teachers a chance to show that they too are in touch with modern technological developments. As developments such as these are especially present in the lives of young students, this may boost their confidence in their EFL teachers.

Conclusion

EFL teachers want a chance to react to new technological developments and show that they are in touch with them. Since many public and private institutions which provide EFL classes respond slowly to these new developments, EFL teachers must look for ways to integrate them into their lessons somehow if they want to prepare for the future.

The Internet holds three main promises for the ELT professional. It provides resources for the EFL teacher, which otherwise would be difficult to locate. It provides the chance to communicate with other users, who otherwise would not find each other. Its also provides a wealth of information, which otherwise would be more difficult and time-consuming to find.

The guidelines proposed above take advantage of the information that the Internet provides, enabling EFL teachers who work under less than ideal conditions to incorporate the Internet into their classrooms. The guidelines outline a method for integrating traditional information with information from the Internet by taking advantage of students who have access at home. They may be applied to content-based, task-based, or project-based lessons and units of work that require information-collecting. This set of guidelines enables all EFL professionals to incorporate the Internet into their lesson-planning immediately.

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