Research Article

USING WEBSITES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

In this article it is informed about the basic skillset needed for effective use of the Internet with students and take a closer look at the process for introducing the Internet into teaching foreign languages, find evaluated and decided on a collection of web pages which teachers want to use as part of teaching.

KEYWORDS

Printed pages, Internet connection, computer lab, ELT websites, authentic sites, Search engines;

INTRODUCTION

Using websites is one of the easiest and least stressful ways of getting started with technology in the classroom. There is a large and constantly expanding collection of resources on the web, at a variety of levels and covering an amazing array of topics. You can choose from authentic (written for Internet surfers in general) sources or ELT-specific sites (made by, and for, teachers), monolingual or multilingual sites, sites with multimedia, or just simple text, for those on slower connections.

The web is a source of content which can be used as a window on the wider world outside your class, and is - of course - a readily available set of authentic material.

As such, it is a much larger repository of content than would previously have been readily available to you and your students.

Perhaps one of the best tips we can give you at this point is to work as a team with other teachers in your centre. Everybody has their favourite websites, and plenty of teachers will, at some point, have used websites in class, or taken material from the web and adapted it for teaching purposes. Take the time to share sources of content with other teachers and organize regular get-togethers where you sit down and discuss what you have found on the Internet and how you have used it in class. Collaboration like this can help to reduce the time you spend searching for good materials and the time spent preparing activities or making worksheets. Just as the Internet is becoming more of a collaborative medium, so should your use of it in your teaching.

The technology needed to use the Internet for teaching is relatively limited and the chances of something going wrong are greatly reduced over more complex technology approaches such as attempting to carry out live chat or video-conferencing sessions.

Another advantage of this tool is that you don't necessarily have to rely on a constant Internet connection if you bear in mind that it is possible to save local copies of websites on your computer, or print out potentially useful pages for later use. Indeed, you can use web pages in the classroom in a variety of ways:

▢   as printed pages, with no computers. Although printing is not necessarily the cheapest option, it is certainly a viable one in places where there may be limited access to the Internet. Indeed, a lot of activities using web pages will only necessitate the printing of one or two pages, which can subsequently be photocopied.

▢   with one computer with an Internet connection. This can be enhanced by connecting the computer to a data projector or even an interactive whiteboard, allowing for greater visibility in class, but it is also possible to make use of a single computer on its own connected to the Internet for reference.

▢   in a computer lab with a set of networked and connected computers. If you're lucky enough to be in this kind of situation, then you are ideally placed to incorporate Internet content into your regular teaching.

It's important that both you and your learners see the use of the Internet as an intrinsic part of the learning process, rather than as an occasional activity which has nothing to do with their regular study programme. We would therefore recommend that, if you plan to use the Internet, you should talk to your learners and

explore the reasons for using this resource with them. This can be done at lower levels in their own language or in English with higher-level classes. You will need to talk to your learners about why Internet content may be useful to them and discuss their attitudes to technology in general- when they use computers, and what for. Show them how the course book and other materials can be enhanced by extra material from the Internet, but above all, make it clear that this is not a toy, not something that you are just using to fill in the time.

With some learners there may be some resistance to regular computer use in, the classroom. We have often found, for example, that professional people view computers as work tools rather than as resources for learning. It is vital that they appreciate that this is a useful, as well as an entertaining, tool in the classroom and that it can contribute to their language development in a variety of ways, for example by giving them the opportunity to build vocabulary or improve their listening skills. Lower-level classes can be engaged with visual and multimedia materials, the use of songs and other video materials.

ELT websites or authentic websites? Your choice of website will depend largely on what you want to achieve with it. Many teachers tend to steer clear of authentic websites, and by this we mean any site not created with the language learner in mind, believing that their students will find them too difficult. But, as

with all authentic materials, the level and language challenges posed by these sites can be largely mitigated by the type of task you expect your learners to carry out.

A well-designed task will allow your learners to deal with authentic sites, guiding them through not only the text, but also the layout and navigation problems that may otherwise impact on their learning experience.

It is also the case that many learners these days are far more used to working with computer-based text and information than they are to dealing with more traditional, paper-based forms of text and this familiarity with the conventions of web design can count in your favour when deciding to use authentic content from the Internet.

Authentic sites, on the other hand, can be chosen to fit your learners' interests. This is a key factor in keeping motivation high in your electronic classroom. When evaluating authentic sites for possible incorporation into your teaching, try to find ones which have an easy structure and navigation, and with smaller chunks of text per page. These will be more approach able and understandable. Design your tasks to make them achievable, and show your learners how they can use online dictionary sites to help them- if they need them.

Authentic sites also provide an ideal opportunity to work through the issues of 'total comprehension' that
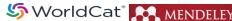
plenty of learners have to deal with at some point in their studies.

How to find useful websites? As already mentioned, the Internet is a vast repository of information and resources, and it is perhaps exactly this range that makes it seem, at first, daunting and unapproachable to most teachers. In the next two sections we take a look at how to find and evaluate resources for use in class.

The ability to search through Internet content, and quickly and efficiently find suitable resources is perhaps the most underrated, and yet most useful, skill that both teachers and learners can acquire.

For teachers, having good search skills means finding useful resources quickly, speeding up lesson planning and facilitating web use in class. For learners, it means being able to quickly accomplish web-based tasks, thus ensuring that the technology enhances the learning experience rather than impeding it. It makes sense, then, both to acquire these skills, and to spend some time sharing them with your learners.

There are three basic ways of searching on the Internet, and we will briefly describe them below, and look at ways of making searches more targeted and efficient.

Search engines. Although there is a large variety of search engines, perhaps the most well-known is

Google (www.google.com),which currently indexes over twelve billion web pages.

A search engine is almost directly analogous to a telephone directory, or any other database of stored information. You search for a name or a title, and the directory gives you more information about that entry. But with over twelve billion pages to choose from, it's not quite as easy to use as a phone directory. So how do you find exactly what you want?

The answer comes in knowing what kind of information Google actually has on each web page that it indexes. What Google knows about a page is generally the page address on the web, the page title, when it was last updated and a few key words associated with the content itself. These key words are defined by the designer of the page, and can reasonably be expected to accurately reflect the content of the page. The key to good searching in Google is to define your key words properly.

The other technique which you may find useful is to use the 'phrase' search technique which involves wrapping part of a phrase in inverted commas, thus ensuring that Google will treat the words not as individual entities, but will actually look for sentences on web pages which contain those words in that particular order.

Thus, instead of searching for cheap hotel in Rome, which can search for any or all of these words, in any position and order, on a page, try searching for "cheap

hotel in Rome" as part of a phrase you might expect to find on a web page.

The ultimate trick with Google is to try to imagine the web page you are looking for, and then try to visualize the content that is on this ideal page. This technique will help you decide on exactly what to search for.

Real language searches. A real language search such as Ask (www.ask.com) allows the user to type simple questions as search queries. Thus our learner who is investigating the life and times of Shakira types something along the lines of "When was Shakira born?" instead of a selection of appropriate key words. Note that the website does not actually analyse or indeed understand the question itself but rather selects the keywords from the query and constructs a search based on them.

A search on Ask should give you a results page with the answer to your question at the top (where Ask has been able to find a direct answer), and links to relevant sites below that.

Your choice of search facility will depend on how you like to work, and which site you find particularly attractive and useful. However, it is worth taking the time to play with all three and to spend some time exploring them with your learners. Learners can benefit from an exposure to all three types, as they activate different linguistic and mental processes. Keywords are good for exploring word relationships

and lexical areas. Subject searches help define and refine ideas and contexts. A real search can provide useful practice in question formation.

A simple way of introducing the topic of searching the Internet in class is to produce a trivia quiz or short 'treasure hunt' type activity for your learners to do. Give them a set of questions and allow them to use all three search pages to find the answers. Make it into a timed quiz, with the first team to finish bringing the activity to an end. Then go over the answers and help them to see how to improve their search skills.

It is at this point that you can examine which search page was used in each case, if it was the appropriate choice, and work together as a group to extrapolate general conclusions about search techniques.

Sample treasure hunt. Use your search skills to find this Information:

- The name of the president of the World Bank.
- The capital of Scotland.
- The country that won the 1986 FIFA World Cup.
- The author of "Of Mice and Men".
- Nationality of the architect of "La Pedrera".
- The director of the movie, North by Northwest.

In this example we can see how a variety of approaches would be possible- and how these might lead to a useful discussion on search skills, as well as some basic language work, on question formation, for example.

The first search encourages the use of Google and the 'part of a sentence' approach discussed above, with perhaps the best search term being" Is the president of the World Bank", while the second one might work nicely as a real language search, with learners coming up with the question "What's the capital of Scotland?" The third search involves reformulation to be successful, perhaps "Who won the 1986 FIFA World Cup?" These are the skills which are the basis of many of the activities you will do on the Internet, so it is worth spending sometime refining them and examining them a little more closely.

It is also worth considering specialist sites as a source of information. Teach yourself and your learners to think a little more laterally. For example, any queries related to movies might be better directed to the Internet Movie Database (wwwimdb.com) than a search engine. Similarly, book information can be easily found on the Amazon site (www.amazon. com), and football World Cup information on the FIFA site (www.fifa.com).

Variations on this treasure hunt activity include learners then making a quiz for another team to do. They must be able to find the answers themselves before they hand over the task to the other team. Or the whole class could make a quiz for you, the teacher, to do as homework! This can be a highly motivating task for learners, as they pit themselves and their Internet skills against the teacher's.

There are also subject-or media-specific search sites which are worth having a quick look at, though do bear in mind that much of what you find on media search sites will be subject to copyright, so please check the terms of use before including anything in any materials you might make. You might like to try the following to get started:

- http://images.google.com/- Google image search, allows you to search an enormous collection of images in various formats. A good place to start looking for illustrations for worksheets, teaching materials, projects or presentations.

- http://froogle.google.com/ - Google shopping search, gives you access to comparative shopping results for products. Use this to find products you are interested in, read reviews and find the best prices.

- http://video.search.yahoo.com/ - Yahoo! video search allows you to search a large database of online video material by keyword or category. Ideal if you want to demonstrate something in a more lively way, for music videos and other multimedia classes.

You may also like to try one of the Meta search sites. These are sites which search more than one search engine at the same time, giving you, for example, the ability to search Yahoo!, Google and Ask from one single page. Examples include:

⬚   http://www.dogpile.com/ - Dogpile.

⬚   http://www.kartoo.com/ - KartOO.

⬚   http://www.mamma.com/ - Mamma.

You will, of course, get far more results than if you simply used one single search engine, but you will also get a sense of balance from a meta search engine, as the results come from a variety of sources using a variety of search techniques. You will tend to get a more rounded view of what is out there on the Internet. Concentrating on the first couple of pages of results will help reduce the potentially overwhelming quantity of data returned.

How to evaluate websites? Having found potentially useful websites, the next step is to evaluate how useful and appropriate they are for the classroom. You will also need to think about the aims and objectives of your lesson. Does the website you have found fit in with these, and does it enhance and complement the other materials and activities you have planned for the class? Sometimes the Internet content will be the core of a particular lesson but at other times it will merely serve as a jumping-off point into something more closely related to a particular course book theme or unit, or be a source of extra material to follow up on the core classroom content. There are various standard criteria for judging websites which can serve as a starting point for your evaluation:

1 Accuracy:

⬚   Who wrote the page? Is this person an expert in the subject matter? Check qualifications, experience - look for an "about me" link.

⬚   Is the page content reliable and factually correct? Cross-reference with other similar websites and encyclopedias.

2 Currency:

⬚   Is the content up-to-date? Check factual information against other reliable sources.

⬚   When was the page last updated? Check for information at the bottom / top of the page.

3 Content:

⬚   Is the site interesting and stimulating? Consider the content from your learners' point of view.

⬚   Is it attractive and easy to navigate? Check the colour combinations, the logic of the links and visual structure.

4 Functionality:

⬚   Does the site work well? Are there any broken links? Be sure to check all pages, and follow all links to all pages you intend to use.

It may well be that the accuracy and currency criteria, both essentially factual, are not of interest to you if you

are working on a purely linguistic level that is planning a class that exploits the language of the site, rather than the content itself. On the other hand, accuracy and currency might be the most important criteria if learners are taking notes and interpreting information in preparation for producing a project.

As far as content is concerned, note that criteria such as ease-of-use and interest are taken into account, but you may also want to consider adding a further set of criteria here along the lines of appropriateness. In this subcategory you would note which groups or levels the site would be suitable for and any problems you foresee with the site itself.

Functionality will be a category with consequences for all teachers. Not only can it be very frustrating to follow through the content of a site to be met with broken links and missing information, but it can be equally frustrating to wait twenty minutes for a short video to download due to the speed of your connection. Again, careful preparation and investigation in the lesson planning stage can go a long way towards making the learners' experience enjoyable and trouble-free.

However, you evaluate the usefulness of the websites you find, make sure that you keep a record of the content and address so that you begin to build up a large stock of evaluated sites.

Web teaching dos and don'ts. Planning carefully and adopting a structured approach to the way you use websites in the classroom should give you the confidence to try out different ways of introducing your learners to Internet content.

Most of the time you will be using websites to provide your learners with knowledge and content which they perhaps do not know or would normally not have access to, or to supplement more traditional course materials. This can be highly motivating for them, leading to more language production and a higher stake in the success of the class.

It is worth bearing in mind that it is not necessarily the 'all-singing, all-dancing' websites – ones with a lot of animation, video, audio or other multimedia content- which will be of most interest or use in your classrooms. Don't discount simple text-based websites which might be very beneficial in your own context. Apart from anything else, they are less likely to malfunction or cause problems when you go to use them.

However, having said all this, things can and sometimes do go wrong. To round off this article, here are a few considerations and some contingency plans:

⬜ Whenever you use technology you should always have a backup plan in place. There might be times when the websites are down, or the computers crash or, worse still, the electricity goes off. So be prepared.

Use the knowledge of other teachers and of your learners to help you with the technical side of the lesson. We often team teach with less experienced teachers, taking care of the small technical problems which occasionally arise, and leaving them free to enjoy the technology and to teach. Asking tech-savvy learners to assist takes the pressure off you and also gives them some investment in the successful outcome of the class.

If it's a lesson that involves relatively few web pages, try saving them to your computer hard disk. From Internet Explorer, choose 'File...''Save As...' then give the file a name and make sure the 'Web Page, complete' option is selected. This will save the web page and all its images and you'll be able to open the page seven if the connection goes down. You could even go so far as to print them out.

Bearing in mind all these suggestions – and taking into account the successful combination of these searching, evaluating and planning skills- you should now be in a position to fully explore the web with your learners.

In summary, consider the difference between EFL-related and authentic websites, look at how to find websites using different types of search engine, consider how to evaluate a website for classroom use, look at lesson planning using Internet resources, at both higher and lower levels and provide a list of Internet teaching dos and don'ts.

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