

Using the Websites in Interactive-Based English Language Learning

Mingxin Li

Henan Polytechnic University, CHINA.

snowlily2008@yeah.net

ABSTRACT

Computers have been used for language teaching ever since the 1960's. The new century witnesses the application of interactive call. The reasons for using computer-based technology learning include: (a) experiential learning, (b) motivation, (c) enhance student achievement, (d) authentic materials for study, (e) greater interaction, (f) global understanding. The study investigated the role of ESL websites as a means to practice the interactive-based language learning in-class instruction. Data collected revealed the students had an overall positive attitude to using the websites to enhance interactive way in their leaning of English, which turns out to be effective and necessary.

Keywords: Interactive-mode; ESL; computer

INTRODUCTION

Computer technology became more accessible to both individuals and schools. Moreover, our growing understanding of its potentials has encouraged a shift in emphasis from computer technology itself to its applications. That is finding ways to use computers for enhancing teaching and learning has gained prominence in the research. Interest in using internet and multimedia as tools to support language learning is growing both from the perspective of a language educators and that of a language learner. In the last few years the number of teachers using Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) has increased markedly and numerous articles have been written about the role of technology in education in the 21st century. It is obvious that we have entered a new information age in which the links between technology and TEFL have already been established.

Interactive-based makes it possible for student-centered class. A triangle relationship can be established in the process of English learning: input-output-situation. The development of the Internet brought about a revolution in the teachers' perspective, as the teaching tools offered through the Internet were gradually becoming more reliable. Nowadays, the Internet is gaining immense popularity in foreign language teaching and more and more educators and learners are embracing it. The emergence of the Internet is affecting every aspect of education and changing the way we teach and learn. "It is no longer a question of whether to take advantage of these electronic technologies in foreign language instruction, but of how to harness them and guide our students in their use"[1]. Numerous websites present compilations of online resources for language teachers. Still other sites such as the Internet TESL Journal at <http://iteslj.org>, and Teaching with the Web at <http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu> contain ideas for using web resources as a language teaching tool.

Among the reasons for using the web in ESL learning increased student motivation, authentic language, and global awareness have been cited. However, there are still many problems with the application of the Internet in the classroom including the reliability of the information on the web, the cost of the equipment needed to connect to the Internet, and frustrating slow connections.

The degree to which the Internet is useful in language learning depends fundamentally on how well the materials found match the needs of the students and their ability level. For

students with limited language ability, even websites specifically designed for ESL students will not prove helpful unless the content is relevant and the instructions understandable. In this regard, we have designed a project to introduce students to selected ESL websites and to find ways to use these sites to enrich their learning experience. The overall purpose of this study was to investigate (1) how teachers could effectively help students learn English through ESL websites and (2) how students perceived learning English through these teacher-selected websites. The survey will show the functions the websites performed in the interactive-based situation.

IMPORTANCE OF APPLYING PEDAGOGY IN INTERACTIVE CALL

The realization that technology is essentially important without creative and imaginative application was ever strong in the nineties. Language educators argued, it is how we use these tools that will ultimately affect our students and the foreign language curriculum. In a series of discussions, Chapelle proposed to ground Call research and development in interactions second language learning theory, and suggested that computers should be viewed as a participant to facilitate communication and CALL activities. An example of applying the integrationist second language learning theory via the web technology was shown to guide the process of CALL development, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Moreover, discourse analysis could describe the interaction between the learner and the computer effectively [2].

Designing pedagogically effective Call activities became a concern. More and more scholars concerned themselves with the appliance of multimedia and other disciplines, which covers socio-cultural theory based instructional design model for listening and viewing comprehension with multimedia [3], and a learner-based design model focusing on learners' goals and needs, rather than on the technology itself [4].

In those discussions, the importance of technology enhanced student-centered activities was emphasized. Realizing the lack of design guidelines for language educators, Hemard presented some design principles for creating hypermedia authoring applications. The principles included "knowing and appreciating the intended user' needs," "user-task match," and "providing easy error-solving devices"[5]. He suggested considering such actors as technical, authoring, task, interface requirements, when authoring hypermedia language applications. Based upon second language acquisition theory, Chapelle suggested seven criteria for developing multimedia Call. They were (1) making key linguistic salient, (2) offering modifications of linguistic input, (3) providing opportunities for 'comprehensible output,'(4) providing opportunities for learners to notice their errors,(5) providing opportunities for learners to correct their linguistic output, (6) supporting modified interaction between the learner and the computer, and (7) acting as a participant in L2 tasks[6].

Computers have been used for language teaching ever since the 1960's. This 40-year period can be divided into three main stages: behaviorist CALL, Communicative CALL, and interactive CALL. The Interactive CALL as the last stage of computer-assisted Language Learning seeks both to integrate the various skills of language learning (listening, speaking, writing, and reading) and to integrate technology more fully into language teaching. To this end the multimedia-networked computer provides a range of informational, communicative, and publishing tools that are potentially available to every student. Research and practice suggest that, appropriately implemented, interactive-based network technology can contribute significantly to:

Motivation

Computers are most popular among students either because they are associated with fun and games or because they are considered to be fashionable. Student motivation is therefore increased, especially whenever a variety of activities are offered, which make them feel more independent.

Enhanced Student Achievement

Network-based instruction can help pupils strengthen their linguistic skills by positively affecting their learning attitude and by helping them build self-instruction strategies and promote their self-confidence.

Greater Interaction

Random access to Web pages breaks the linear flow of instruction. By sending E-mail and joining newsgroups, EFL students can communicate with people they have never met. They can also interact with their own classmates. Furthermore, some Internet activities give students positive and negative feedback by automatically correcting their on-line exercises.

Individualization

Shy or inhibited students can be greatly benefited by individualized, student-centered collaborative learning. High fliers can also realize their full potential without preventing their peers from working at their own pace.

Independence from a Single Source of Information

Although students can still use their books, they are given the chance to escape from canned knowledge and discover thousands of information sources. As a result, their education fulfills the need for interdisciplinary learning in a multicultural world.

Global Understanding

A foreign language is studied in a cultural context. In a world where the use of the Internet becomes more and more widespread, an English Language teacher's duty is to facilitate students' access to the web and make them feel citizens of a global classroom, practicing communication on a global level.

PURPOSE

The Internet and the rise of computer-mediated communication in particular have reshaped the uses of computers for language learning. Arising their interest in language learning, the two-traffic communication between the learner and the partner on internet provides a real situation. Students have become active participants in learning and are encouraged to be explorers and creators of language rather than passive recipients of it [7]. Integrative CALL stresses these issues and additionally lets learners of a language communicate inexpensively with other learners or native speakers. As such, it combines information processing, communication, use of authentic language, and learner autonomy, all of which are of major importance in current language learning theories.

Research and Procedures

This study investigated the potential role of ESL/EFL websites as an interactive-mode to supplement in-class instruction. It evaluated a program in which forty-nine students enrolled in a high-beginner EFL class. They were introduced to five websites and instructed to use them for a homework assignment and for self-study. Data collected revealed that despite some difficulties encountered, students had an overall positive attitude to using the teacher-

selected websites in their learning of English. The students found that learning English through ESL/EFL websites – the interactive mode that different from the conventional learning- was interesting and that the teaching strategies used by the teachers were effective and necessary.

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.

Purposes of the Study

The degree to which the Internet is useful in language learning depends fundamentally on how well the materials found match the needs of the students and their ability level. The overall purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers could effectively help students learn English through ESL websites already available on the Internet and how students perceived learning English to practice it by interactive-mode through these websites. More specifically, we intended to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in terms of the following research questions:

1. What strategies used by the teachers to facilitate interactive-mode through ESL websites?
2. Do students think it is appropriate to learn English through the interactive mode?
3. What problems and difficulties do students encounter in the process of ESL by the interactive mode?

METHODOLOGY

Participants & Context

The participants were a class of 60(20 male, 40 female) students majoring in mechanics and minor in English at a technological college of languages in Henan Polytechnic University. The first language of all of the students is Mandarin Chinese and their ages range from 17-18. They place at the high-beginner level in language ability and have received at least four years of formal instruction in the English language. At the time of this research project, they were taking three required English courses: Conversation and Writing, Reading, and Listening. This project was implemented in the students' Conversation and Writing course, which aims to enable students to speak fluently on a variety of conversational topics as well as to write accurately in well-organized paragraphs. Vocabulary, including idioms and phrasal verbs, and grammar structures are two of the major foci of the class.

Procedure

During the last week of April 2010, the students were divided into two groups and each group was given the same 50-minute training session at the English department's resource center. With active links to websites which had sections thought to be appropriate to their level and related to the content being covered in the class. The five websites were:

1. Activities for ESL Students (<http://a4esl.org/>)
2. Interesting Things for ESL Students (<http://www.manythings.org/>)
3. Reading Materials for Beginners (<http://www.eslgold.com>)
4. Listening Comprehensive Materials for ESL Students (<http://www.putclub.com/daily.htm>)
5. Exercises for ESL College Students (<http://www.52en.com>)

The students were then given two weeks to complete a series of homework activities using the websites presented after the training session. The activities included exercises on slang expressions, idioms, phrasal verbs and vocabulary as well as reading, writing and listening practice. Moreover, students were asked to join a discussion thread in the student forums of learning. They were also encouraged to play some of the language games found at the different sites. A semester after the training session, the students were asked to hand in their assignments and to complete an anonymous questionnaire concerning their perceptions of the experience. It includes the following sections:

- a. Perceptions of the teaching strategies (recommendation and introduction to the websites, instructions for online navigation);
- b. Perceptions of the appropriateness of the program;
- c. Difficulties and problems that students encountered during the program;

RESULTS

Generally speaking, the students were positive about their learning experience through ESL websites (Table 1). Although most of them indicated that learning English with the Internet is not only interesting ($M = 2.89$) but also effective ($M = 2.75$), some still have doubts. This could be explained by their overall interest in learning English with 73.5% of the students indicating that they were somewhat interested and only 26.5% indicating that they were strongly interested. The term “effective” might not have been the best word to use in the questionnaire since it is vague. It is also difficult for students to judge the effectiveness of a new technology after only being familiar with it for a semester.

Table 1. Students’ Overall Perceptions of Using the Internet to Learn English

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Using the Internet is an interesting way to learn English	2.89	0.71
Using the Internet is an effective way to learn English	2.75	0.69

N=60

Overall, the students reacted very positively towards the strategies that the teachers used to facilitate their learning through ESL websites as indicated in Table 2. Students in our study felt that they needed instructions for online navigation, recommendation on useful sites ($M = 3.37$) and an introduction to the contents of the selected sites ($M = 3.32$). These results strengthen our belief that the students’ lack of experience using educational resources on the Internet. In addition, the students found instruction in online navigation, introduction to the contents of the selected ESL websites ($M = 3.00$), and the homework assignment ($M = 2.87$) effective in their learning of English through ESL websites.

Table 2. Perceptions of Teaching Strategies Used

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
The teacher’s recommendation of websites was necessary	3.37	0.64
Instruction in online navigation and the introduction to site contents were effective	3.32	0.77
The web page with links to the recommended sites was effective	3.00	0.81
The homework assignment using websites was effective	2.87	0.69

N=60

The students did encounter difficulties and problems during the course of learning online. The main problem perceived was spending too much time visiting the websites, rather than an integral part of the in-class instruction and the students might be affected by browsing the other websites. Another problem calls for solve is technical problem, not being able to download sounds was perceived to be a more serious problem than not being able to get online. Lastly, a set time spent on learning online can't meet their demand.

Table 3. Difficulties Encountered during the Program

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
I got disconnected when downloading sounds	2.33	0.89
I spend so much time in visiting websites on random	3.00	0.98
I had to spend too much time solving the technical problem	3.10	0.86

N=60

Above all, interactive-based technology promote language learning in efficiency and interest, however, there are problems we cannot ignored. When asked about their recollections of the experience, most students said that it was a positive experience. Over 40students appreciated the rich content on the websites, the variety of the material on them and the fact that some websites divided the content into different levels to satisfy students' demand.

CONCLUSION

As we approach the 21st century, we realize that technology as such is not the answer to all our problems. What really matters is how we use technology. Computers can/will never substitute teachers but they offer new opportunities for better language practice. They may actually make the process of language learning significantly richer and feel a lot more confident with information technology than we do. As a result, they will also be able to use the Internet to communicate more effectively, practice language skills more thoroughly.

The results of this study affirmed that students consider the Internet a useful tool to supplement in-class instruction. The students deemed it appropriate to learn English through teacher-recommended ESL websites. And realize the importance of guiding the students in the use of Internet resources. The strategies used by the teachers (constructing a web page with links to recommended sites, instructing students in online navigation, introducing the contents of the selected sites) were helpful and necessary. Satisfaction with the strategies that the teachers used and the contents of the websites outweighed dissatisfaction due to difficulties accessing and using the assigned websites.

The notably favorable is to fully exploit a learner-centered curriculum through building interactive-mode session into the class schedule, not only in the beginning but on an ongoing basis, to set a situation which is based on communication between students and the language world. So with the aid of computer –based technology, students do not imply a passive role for teachers, and teachers learn to become a “guide on side” rather than “sage on the stage”. Interactive –mode learning coordinates the roles of teacher, computer and students they serve in the process of ESL. It also provides some assistance to teachers attempting to effectively combine their own goals, their student’s needs and the power of computer.

For further research, several recommendations are offered. In addition to websites designed particularly for ESL/EFL learners, it is worth looking at the possibility of integrating other websites containing authentic materials such as online reference books and commercial

websites into the ESL/EFL curriculum. Besides studies of learning perceptions, research studies should also explore whether learners' target language proficiency improves from the use of Internet resources. Last but not least, a comparison between a curriculum using Internet resources and one will shed light on what the best strategies for teaching ESL/EFL are.

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