REVIEW OF *THE INTERNET AND YOUNG LEARNERS*
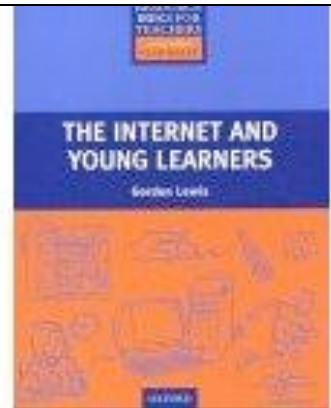
The Internet and Young Learners

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The introduction of *The Internet and Young Learners* suggests an aim of "putting the EFL teacher in a position to kill two birds with one stone" (p. 5) - that is, linking language teaching to young learners' interest in the Internet. "Young learners" are conceived as students of English between the ages of 7 and 15 (between 8 and 13 on the back cover). The Internet is mainly equated with assumed basic word processing and web navigation skills, although many children today already have many more sophisticated Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills. The language learning examples of the book chiefly focus on how the Internet provides authentic language resources. How well then does the book achieve its main aim in terms of EFL teachers interested in using the Internet to engage young learners?

The book is organized into four main sections of learning activities, which can be both separately and convergently reviewed as efforts to introduce the Internet to young learners, and also to exemplify learning activity approaches and ideas. A brief initial *First Steps* section focuses on basic word processing skills leading up to a review of provided webpage links. In contrast, the *Web Search Activities* in section three are twice as expansive as any other section, suggesting that these activities are more central to the purpose of the book than the focus on *Communication* and *Web Creation* activities in the second and fourth sections, respectively. Additionally, three short sections at the end of the book comprise the use of electronic portfolios, the Internet as teachers' resource, and useful Internet addresses.

The short *Communication* section focuses on the power of an authentic online audience to motivate young learners in writing activities. An initial activity, *Getting to Know You,* asks students to respond to the teacher's introductory email message and request to "know more about you". Most of the other activities in this section revolve around writing emails to other learners in a foreign partner school. These online partnerships will need to be organized by the teacher, and the *Useful Internet Addresses* section points to sites such as the Global Schoolhouse as sources for lists of potential partner schools. The pretexts provided for these language interactions are typically topics the author assumes to be of interest to young learners (e.g., *Houses Around the World, Pocket Money*, *A Look in My Fridge*), or more interactive activities, such as a *Cumulative Story,* where email partners from either the same class or a partner school take turns building a story together. The author justifies his restricted focus on email communications by referring to "safety reasons" (p. 7). But many young learners today are proficient in interacting via Internet communications (both asynchronous and synchronous), including blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, messaging, and various kinds of web-forums. Also, moderated synchronous chat forums designated for effective educational purposes (e.g., EFL MOOs) can be set up in a reasonably safe context.

With its introductory focus, the book might have discussed further some of these other Internet communication possibilities.

Section three, *Web Search Activities,* develops the main focus of the book. Many of the activities in this section are built around authentic Internet information resources, such as currency converters, weather sites, local tourist offices, and travel information. In terms of activity ideas linked to language learning tasks, the section provides a range of ideas which many teachers might find useful. For instance, activity *3.6, World Travel,* outlines how learners might decide on an interesting travel destination as a focus for researching online timetables and information about their choices. However, as typified by activity *3.16, Rivers*, learners are simply asked to choose a particular river and to find their own information about the topic – and this could be accomplished online as well as offline. A couple of activities in this section provide a specific website link or resource for students to search, but often only as a general background resource. For instance, in activity *3.15, My Local Habitat,* the URL http://www.enchantedlearning.com/biomes is provided for learners to explore different animal habitats. Some activities are linked to either useful worksheets in the appendix or general links in the *Useful Internet Addresses* section. However, in contrast to, for example, the well-known Webquest model, none of the worksheets (except *1.7, What's in a Website,* which asks learners to find and review a website) require completion using Internet resources and might equally well be completed using school library books.

Similar to section two, the *Web Creation* activity section provides a general outline of activities which engage learners in writing and, in some instances, producing drawings or digital photos, which could be uploaded to the Web. However, most of these activities could just as easily be done on paper. For instance, activity *4.10, Switchzoo,* invites learners to write about imaginary animals. After doing this on paper or in a word-processing program, learners are then asked to post their product to a class, or personal, website to be developed separately. Likewise, activity *4.11, Online Cookbook,* asks students to write recipes, followed by instructions for the last step of the procedure:

> 7. After class, scan the recipes or format them in html and link the individual recipes to a central recipe homepage. This homepage can be local or on the internet (p. 99).

Unfortunately, the author provides no further instructions on how to design websites, neither for students nor for teachers. Instead, students are referred to several links in the appendix, which relate to free web-hosting services (such as www.geocities.com) and a link to the online tutorial site Webmonkey. While activity *4.6, King or Queen for the Week,* does offer the advice "if you are having trouble creating a website, make a PowerPoint presentation instead" (p. 92), no further advice is provided about PowerPoint - perhaps with an assumption that many young learners in schools around the world today already use PowerPoint for hyper-linked multimedia projects.

Useful Internet Addresses are provided at the end of the book. An initial section includes general educational links, while a second *Content* section organizes links around headings related to some of the earlier activities (e.g., *Animals, Birthdays, Natural World, Sports*). However, these websites are not directly connected to any of the activities in the book. The other two short sections that follow at the end of the book, *Electronic Portfolios* and *The Internet as a Teacher Resource,* are useful introductions but are also not linked to any activities, nor are these sections discussed in relation to any practical examples or their potential to link to the earlier activities. Just as the activity sections of the book might have been linked to some sample Internet resources, so too might these sections have been developed in terms of both activities and practical examples. Electronic portfolios in particular are becoming a widely used tool of ICT-focused learning, assessment, and profiling by teachers. Therefore, novice, or less technologically proficient, teachers might benefit from more concrete advice and examples.

Teachers interested in harnessing the Internet for young learners in their EFL classrooms may be initially reassured by the book's extensive prescriptive lesson-planning format (*level, age, time, aims, materials, in*

class, and even *variations*) for activities for different language learning levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced) and the general section headings (*Communication, Web Creation,* and *Web Search*). However, a closer reading gives the impression that both Internet novices and Internet savvy teachers may struggle in practice to use the book as a guide to exploit the promise of the Internet for their young learners in their classrooms. One reasons is that while the formats are quite detailed (see Figure 1 for an example image from the book), the activities themselves tend to be expressed as general ideas, outlines, or directions. This is especially the case when learners are supposed to use the Internet in activities. While the apparent audience for the book is Internet novice teachers, these in particular would benefit from sample activities which are more explicitly developed in structure and Internet application. On the other hand, more internet savvy or ICT literate teachers would perhaps be interested in general or overview strategies at the outset of each of the four main activity sections for linking language learning tasks to different uses of the Internet to engage learners.

4.2   'Design it' dictation

LEVEL	**Elementary and above**
AGE	**8 and above**
TIME	**60 minutes**
AIMS	**To describe and understand the location of objects on a web page; to design a clear web page.** **Language:** Prepositions, web terminology.
MATERIALS	Some large pieces of paper, at least one for each child.
IN CLASS	1 Once the children have created a mind map of their website's content (see activity 3.1, 'What's it about?'), they need to think about where the content should be placed on the various pages. Tell them you want to design their homepage first.

2 Show the children some examples of websites created professionally and by children. (See the book's website for sites listing class web pages.)

3 Introduce some vocabulary to do with placing objects (text and illustration) on web pages. Ask them questions such as:

– *Where will you put the text?*
– *In the centre?*
– *On the right?*
– *On the left?*
– *In front/behind/next to?*
– *Where will the photos go?*
– *What colour will you use for the background/text?*

4 Distribute some large pieces of paper. Let the children draw a picture of their homepage.

5 Once the children have completed their web designs, put two groups together. One group describes their website to the other while that groups draws what they hear.

6 Hang up the website designs on the wall. Let the children look at them.

Figure 1. The activity format used in *The Internet and Young Learners*

The book appears to be so intent on outlining a series of task categories and a basic lesson-planning format, often seen in current teaching materials (cf. for example, TESOL's *New Ways* Series), that considerations of whether even the timing of the activities is realistic have not been given a great priority. This is despite a qualifying clause at the outset that timing suggestions are "minimum times" (p. 25). As the book is part of the wider series *Resource Books for Teachers*, it is perhaps likely that there was a requirement to fit it into a similar format.

A related issue is that the prescribed aim of every activity in the book as reflected in its description and level is a *language* aim (sometimes grammatical, but mostly vocabulary or topic focused; for example, *3.16, Rivers,* links to both the vocabulary of geography and animals on one hand, and to learning about simple past tense on the other) when the focus should be on connecting and developing activities in terms of Internet uses by young learners. Similarly, the activities resemble task ideas from a face-to-face communicative language classroom. As useful as many of these ideas are, the connections made between language learning and *The Internet and Young Learners* (or the stated aim of killing two birds with one stone) tend to remain implicit in this book and are not developed as much as they could have been.

For many EFL teachers, it might have been more useful to outline a range of different types of ICT-focused learning activities which particularly lend themselves to a variety of language learning objectives, topics, and skills. For instance, the *Web Search Activities* section might have included more specific examples of the use of pair or group work when designing tasks for learners to access different kinds of authentic resources on the Internet. It may also have been effective to focus on both an overview and specific examples of types of activity ideas which lend themselves to, or might be adapted to, a language learning context (cf. a more balanced format in Braun, 2001). As it is, there is no mention of well-known activity models such as Webquests (http://webquest.sdsu.edu/), nor the range of tele-collaborative learning task types as, for instance, outlined in Gralla (1999) and Grabe and Grabe (2005). Best practice models of ICT integration in learning are typically conceived as task or project work (e.g., Jonassen, Howland, Moore, & Marra, 2003). The approach in this book is perhaps more the other way round; i.e., conventional lesson-planning linked to ideas to be developed or clarified further.

In relation to their general or extra-curricular interests and interacting with friends, many young learners are quite at home with ICTs and find the new possibilities of multimedia and Internet communication exciting. The Internet (and ICTs more generally) offers significant possibilities for teachers to engage young learners because of its facility for personalization, immediacy, and various notions of interactivity – especially through the connection of both verbal and visual literacies (Mayer, 2001; Kress, 2003). As reflected by the lesson format adopted and the generally non-visual emphasis of the overall design of the book, the conception and development of *The Internet and Young Learners* might have aimed a little more at engaging learners with the sense of excitement about the Internet felt by many young (and also older) learners. This could have been achieved by extending the focus on multimedia related learning task activities (i.e. the use of simple graphics, animations, and even digital movies in language presentations or exchanges). Also, the topics and tools of various sections may have been extended to reflect the prior knowledge and typical interests of many young Internet users. In sum, *The Internet and Young Learners* will be mostly useful to an EFL teacher who has reasonably good Internet literacy and is prepared to "mine" activities for ideas which might be adapted. To do this, the teacher will need to be ready to explore for him/herself what young learners might find most interesting about different aspects of the Internet and multimedia, as many young learners today may know more about technology than their teachers. In this way, teachers may find the Internet a more powerful way of extending the language classroom than is perhaps assumed in the writing of this book.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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