

Using Web-Based Language Learning Activities in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

This article looks at ways of using Web-based language learning (WBLL) activities and reports the results of a WBLL project that developed a Web site as a supplementary resource for teaching English as a second language (ESL) and tested the Web site with a group of students in an ESL context. The Web site provides WBLL session plans for ESL teachers, containing three types of WBLL activities: pre-created Web activities for grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening; task-based Web activities that require students to use the Web to produce certain outcomes; and teacher-made Web activities. Participants in WBLL sessions using the Web site showed positive attitudes toward WBLL and expressed the view that they would like to use more Web activities during and outside class time.

Introduction

The Internet is a global network of computer networks. It provides language teachers with network-based teaching environments in which they can create meaningful tasks and use various materials for language learners. The hypermedia nature of the World Wide Web, in particular, has greatly expanded the power of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) by allowing learners to explore and discover their learning paths themselves and offering them easy access to an on-line database of resources. With a variety of hyperlinked multimedia documents and computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, the Web can support language teachers to integrate Web resources into the language classroom (Son, 2007; Warschauer, 2001). It can be also a virtual library that has a huge amount of information valuable to English as a second language (ESL) teaching (Allodi, Dokter & Kuipers, 1998; Bell, 1998; Felix, 2001; Murray & McPherson, 2004; Son, 2005; Warschauer & Healey, 1998). In addition, Web-based language learning (WBLL) has the potential to increase learner motivation and engage learners in culturally authentic and highly interactive language experience (Chun & Plass, 2000; Gruber-Miller & Benton, 2001; Kung & Chuo, 2002; Mosquera, 2001; Osuna & Meskill, 1998; Rico & Vinagre, 2000).

WBLL is language learning that involves the use of the Web and exploits Web materials, resources, applications or tools (Son, 2007). Given that WBLL occurs with Web activities on the Web, it is important to use well-designed WBLL activities to maximize language learning. This article looks at the use of WBLL activities in an ESL context in terms of design, implementation and evaluation. It also presents

WBLL activities that can be integrated into the ESL classroom, while reporting the results of a WBLL project that explored, selected and developed Web activities for ESL learners and investigated the usefulness of the Web activities in the ESL classroom.

Design

Based on the way of creating, presenting and using materials on the Web, the following types of WBLL activities are proposed: (1) pre-created Web activities adopting interactive language exercises that have been already created by others and are easily accessible on the Web; (2) task-based Web activities making use of a variety of authentic Web resources for communications, information collections, problem-solving tasks, etc.; and (3) teacher-made Web activities employing tailor-made language exercises modified by classroom teachers themselves for their own students.

In practice, it is useful to have a dedicated Web site, containing language learning activities for use in a teaching program. For this reason, a Web site entitled *WBLL Activities for ESL Teachers and Learners* (<http://www.usq.edu.au/users/sonjb/projects/wbll/>) was developed for the integration of WBLL activities into an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) program at an Australian university. A planned approach was taken in introducing and incorporating Web activities into the ELICOS program, which was looking for new, interesting and authentic materials presented in various media in an effort to meet the diverse learning needs of its student body.



Figure 1 Screen shot from the WBLL Website with a session planner

The Website consists of an introductory page and a session plan page showing pre-created, task-based and teacher-made activities. It provides WBLL session materials

for ESL teachers, containing a list of pre-created Web activities for grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening and task-based Web activities that require students to use the Web to produce certain outcomes. It also presents teacher-made Web activities created by using *Hot Potatoes* (<http://hotpot.uvic.ca/>), which is free for educational use and allows the creation of *JavaScript* driven interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and gap-fill exercises. It also allows some customization of the generated files. The files generated for the Web site were made to look as close as possible to the rest of the Web site in terms of the colour-scheme used. An on-line discussion group is also available for users of the Web site.

Implementation

It is necessary for teachers to have teaching plans containing contents and procedures of WBL activities in order to make smooth progress in WBL sessions. Examples of session plans utilizing pre-created Web activities and task-based Web activities listed on the aforementioned Web site are briefly described below.

Pre-created Web activities

[Vocabulary]

There are 4 activities to complete:

1. Suffixes
2. Phrasal verbs
3. Disaster vocabulary
4. Commonly confused words

Things to do:

- (1) Read the information and instructions on each worksheet before doing the activity.
- (2) Some activities require you to write your answers on a table; others require you to answer on-line.
- (3) For all activities, record the number correct in the space given.

Outcome:

Completion of all the activities and marks recorded on the worksheets

[Grammar]

There are 5 activities to complete:

- Articles
- Subject-Verb Agreement
- Verbs
- Connectors
- Word forms

Things to do:

- (1) Read the information and instructions on each worksheet before doing the activity.
- (2) Some activities require you to write your answers on a table; others require you to answer on-line.

(3) For all activities, record the number correct in the space given.

Outcome:

Completion of all the activities and marks recorded on the worksheets

[Reading]

4 reading passages to complete:

Romulus and Remus
Tarzan of the Apes
The Wild Life
Culture Shock

Things to do:

- (1) Go to the websites listed on the worksheets.
- (2) Read through the questions first.
- (3) Read the passages and click on your choice of answer for each question.
- (4) Record the number of correct answers on the worksheet after your first attempt at the questions.

Outcome:

Completion of the activities and marks recorded on the worksheets

[Listening]

There are 7 conversations to listen to ranging from 'easy' to 'difficult':

Haven't we met before?
Camping under the stars
So, what's the matter?
Friday night mishaps
A healthy lifestyle
Money Matters
Exotic Animal Kingdom

Things to do:

- (1) Familiarize yourself with the useful vocabulary section on each worksheet.
- (2) As you listen to each conversation, click on the answer to each question.
- (3) At the end, write down the number correct out of 5 on each worksheet for your first listening.

Outcome:

Completion of the activities and marks recorded on the worksheets

Task-based Web activities

[Newsbreak – Group work]

Things to Do:

- (1) Choose a current topic (news) of interest to your group;
- (2) Find information on the topic on the Web;
- (3) Make a poster with the information from the Web;
- (4) Give an oral presentation with the poster.

Suggested Web Sites:

The Courier-Mail (<http://www.couriermail.news.com.au/>)
CNN.com (<http://www.cnn.com/>)

BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>)

Search Engines:

Google (<http://www.google.com/>)

Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com/>)

Outcome: An oral presentation with a poster

[Cultural differences – Group work]

Things to Do:

- (1) List cultural differences you can think of;
- (2) Find supporting information, evidence or examples from the Web;
- (3) Make a poster about the cultural differences with the findings from the Web.

Suggested Web Sites:

Cultural differences: Questions for discussion

(<http://www.btinternet.com/~ted.power/discsulq.html>)

Exploring cultural differences

(<http://www.studyabroad.com/handbook/cultdiff.html>)

Cultural differences: Making it work virtually

(http://www.crazycolour.com/os/etiquette_03.shtml)

Search Engines:

Google (<http://www.google.com/>)

Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com/>)

Outcome: An oral presentation with a poster

[A book/film review – Pair work]

Things to Do:

- (1) List several books/movies that you already read/saw;
- (2) Choose one of the books/movies that you want to review;
- (3) Find information on the book/movie on the Web;
- (4) Write a review about the book/movie with the information from the Web;
- (5) Send the review to your teacher via e-mail.

Suggested Web Sites:

BookPage.com (<http://www.bookpage.com/>)

Worldbookreview.com (<http://www.worldlibraries.com/>)

Australian Book Review (<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/>)

Movie Review Query Engine (<http://www.mrqe.com/>)

Search Engines:

Google (<http://www.google.com/>)

Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com/>)

Outcome: A review submitted to your teacher via e-mail

[A trip to my dream countries – Individual work]

Things to Do:

Imagine if you could plan a trip, for say one month, anywhere in the world. Let's say you can go to at least two different countries. Of course you have to plan it very carefully to make sure you can do all the things in your dream. Where would you go and what would you need to know about the places before you got there? Write an essay

with information from the Web and send the essay to your teacher via e-mail.

Suggested Web Sites:

Lonely Planet Online (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/>)

The Independent Traveler Online

(<http://www.eleaston.com/travel.html>)

InfoHub Specialty Travel Guide (<http://www.infohub.com/>)

Universal Currency Converter (<http://www.xe.net/ucc/>)

The World Clock (<http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/full.html>)

Search Engines:

Google (<http://www.google.com/>)

Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com/>)

Outcome: An essay submitted to your teacher via e-mail

Through teacher-made Web activities (e.g., quizzes, gap-fill exercises, drop-down questions, crosswords, jumbled-sentence exercises, jumbled-word exercises, ordering exercises, matching exercises), teachers can also provide students with language exercises directly related to their classroom lessons in line with the evolving syllabus of their language courses. By incorporating language games such as crosswords and quizzes, students can practice and test practical skills with fun as an extension of learning activities. Figure 3 below shows an example of the teacher-made Web activities presented on the WBLL Website.

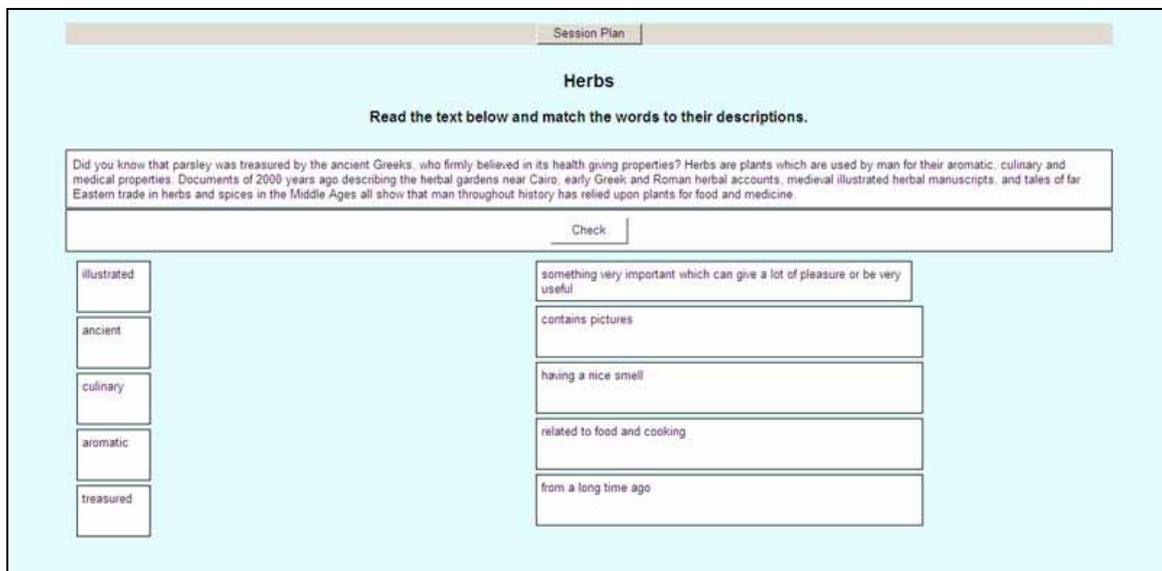


Figure 2 Screen shot from the WBLL Website showing a matching exercise made with JMatch

The following description of a task-based Web activity session written by a classroom teacher gives an idea of how the session could be implemented:

At the start of the session, students were put into groups of three. Each group was made up of students from different nationalities. The online dictionary Web site was written on the board; students were given the activity sheet for that session and some brief instructions. The outcomes for this session were to produce a poster of their news item by the end of the session and use it as part of an oral presentation on the following day. Students moved into their groups at the computers. All four groups focused on the task, not on other things. There was confusion amongst some groups over what a 'current news topic' meant. Once it was explained what kinds of topics were appropriate, the groups chose different topics. Group 1 was the fastest at choosing a news item, taking notes and producing a poster. All students contributed to the poster. Two groups finished their poster by the end of the session. Other groups did theirs outside class time. The teacher's role was to circulate amongst the groups. Interaction between the teacher and students was mainly about appropriate news items.

Evaluation

A small-scale study of ESL students' opinions on the usefulness of the WBL activities was conducted by using a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to the students after they had four WBL sessions (a 1.5 hour-session per week for 4 weeks) with the Web site. A total of 12 students (7 male and 5 female; mean age 27, ranging from 18 to 41 years; 4 native speakers of Chinese, 4 native speakers of Korean, 3 native speakers of Arabic and 1 native speaker of Japanese) in an Upper-Intermediate ELICOS program (entry: IELTS 5.0; exit: IELTS 5.5) completed the questionnaire. Related to the students' views on the Web site and WBL activities, the questionnaire contained 7 statements to which the students responded with Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Uncertain, Agree and Strongly Agree. The results of the students' responses to the questionnaire are summarized and given in Table 1.

The first statement on their enjoyment of the Web activities gained full agreement from all students with a mean of 4.75 (out of 5). Of the 12 students, 5 students strongly agreed and 4 students agreed that they learned a lot from the Web activities (a mean of 4.17). Similarly, 4 students strongly agreed, 6 students agreed and 2 students were uncertain that the Web site was well presented. To the fourth item about the improvement of their confidence in using the Web, 10 students indicated their agreement while 2 students indicated their uncertainty. The fifth item about their interest in the course using WBL was also supported by positive responses from the students with a mean of 4.00. With regard to the use of WBL activities during class time, 5 students strongly agreed, 5 students agreed and 2 students were uncertain. The students' responses to the seventh item about their willingness to access Web activities outside class time showed agreement from all students with a mean of 4.42.

Table 1
Number of Student Responses and Average Ratings on the Questionnaire

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree	Average Ratings (SD=1 – SA=5)
1. I enjoyed the Web activities.	0	0	0	3	9	4.75
2. I learned a lot from the Web activities.	0	0	3	4	5	4.17
3. I found that the Web site was well presented.	0	0	2	6	4	4.17
4. I gained confidence in my ability to use the Web for learning purposes.	0	0	2	7	3	4.08
5. The experiences in Web-based language learning made this course more interesting.	0	0	2	8	2	4.00
6. I would like to use more Web-based language learning activities during class time.	0	0	2	5	5	4.25
7. I would like to access Web activities myself outside class time.	0	0	0	7	5	4.42

Note. N=12; 1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Uncertain, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly Agree

Overall, the students showed positive attitudes toward the use of the Web, agreed that they enjoyed the Web activities and would like to use more WBLL activities during and outside class time. This result is similar to the finding of Son (2007), which observed a different group of ESL students’ engagement in WBLL activities and found the activities to be valuable to the students. Although the study reported in this article involved a small number of students in a short period of time, the findings of the study confirm that WBLL can be useful and helpful for the learning of ESL.

Conclusion

For the development and implementation of effective pedagogy in Web environments, there is a need for teachers to become active and critical Web users and develop their own skills and strategies for selecting and managing Web materials. Teachers need to select or develop high quality Web resources and use the resources through well-prepared WBLL activities. The project Web site presented in this article can be used as a supplementary resource for teaching ESL. The effectiveness of the Web site can be achieved in terms of its ability to elaborate upon language skills taught in classrooms. While the Web site has been designed in a simplistic format for ease of accessibility and interactivity, it can be a reliable site with extensive resources and a number of activities to be freely used in the classroom. It is recommended that the

Web site should be used in conjunction with classroom teaching and should be further developed to improve a broader range of student abilities and motivate student learning. Further studies are also recommended to look at the impact of the use of WBLL activities on students' language development and, as a result, to improve our understanding and knowledge of ways of using WBLL in the ESL classroom.

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