

## Incorporating the Use of the Internet in English Language Classes in Japan

Jeffrey McCarty Suzuki

### Abstract

The internet has continued to touch people from every economic background and age without bias or discrimination and it will continue to grow at exponential rates, and probably in other unpredictable ways in the future. Language pedagogy cannot and should not be immune to the many advantages that the internet has to offer such as the vast amounts of resources, historical and up-to-the-minute information, and opportunities for global communication. This paper discusses the reasons why the use of the internet should be included into English language classes.

### Background

Since 1950, computers have advanced at a pace unparalleled in the history of technology. Processing speed and memory capacity have increased; size and cost have decreased by several orders of magnitude. The pace has not been steady on all fronts, but has always been rapid, and it continues. The internet has been without a doubt the most instrumental component of change for the past twenty years.

Computers have been used since the 1960's for teaching and have constantly evolved becoming easier to use and universally affordable. In the 1980's, programs such as CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) were primarily designed to manipulate words and sentences, playing simple games with students, testing them, and giving them basic feedback on their performance. Used this way, computer learning provided students with many chances to correct their answers and kept their mistakes private from other students. The activities provided a way for the students to take risks without feeling alienated if their answers were incorrect.

As computers evolved with faster CPUs and greater memory, multimedia software

also became more practical. The 1990's saw the arrival of CD-ROMs which were able to store vast amounts of data for students to use such as complete encyclopedias, dictionaries, and language courses with text, graphics, audio and video. Commercial products of this sort are professionally designed, distributed world wide, are reliable to use, straightforward to apply, and have an important place in the learning classroom.

## **Introduction**

The use of the web in schools and its increased use at home does not ensure that students possess effective skills in using the internet. Information professionals (e.g., school and public librarians) who serve students need to collaborate with teachers to identify how the Web can effectively support meaningful learning. Components such as the necessary steps that an educator needs to follow in order to have an effective language class, using the internet for language teaching, censorship, search engines, managing a lesson, reasons why it is essential to use the Internet, and finally an assessment of one particular English learning website will be discussed.

## **Necessary steps**

Teachers cannot make the Web an effective learning and research tool unless they first receive effective, structured training in its use. Students, too, should be taught how to use the Web effectively and efficiently. With critical-thinking skills and an understanding of how to manipulate the Web, students can move from being active explorers of the Web to becoming discerning masters of it.

With electronic media, the boundaries of synchronous and asynchronous communication are being stretched and merged in new ways. As humans continue to invent and use new media, it is likely that we will develop and learn new understandings of communication and interaction. Educators must rely on their experience as educators in planning and using the internet with their students. Language teachers, who have some limited experience of working with computers, either for their personal use or for language teaching, can easily incorporate the internet into their classes.

## **Using the Internet for language teaching**

A. Educators need to understand all of the strengths and weaknesses of the internet. The internet is a valuable resource, and it cannot replace an educator.

Though there are some negative reactions that some educators might feel when they use the internet such as “infobabble” (so much information is accessible that the information becomes trivial) and “infosprawl” (the lack of information organization), and “infoglut” (the enormous amount of available information), the internet is too valuable not to be incorporated into the classroom curriculum.

Carlson (2003), writes that “initial user benefits from search engine technology have been critically degraded over time by the rapid increase of Internet pages. Traditional retrieval strategies therefore yield increasingly poor results due to a dramatic increase in ballast in the results. Search engine users thus increasingly experience information overload (infobabble). Users must redefine their information needs and processing habits...”<sup>1</sup> It is important that non-professional users learn to navigate successfully in an excessively information rich environment such as the Internet.

Millison (2002) illustrates that “online journalism has combined the best, and in some cases the worst, aspects of all previous traditional news media. It offers a level of interactivity-direct communication between news organizations and audiences-never before known, made possible by online news forums. It has brought text, audio, video, and graphics together in a single presentation...”<sup>2</sup> Webpage designers and software designers are always trying to develop new and interesting components that make it thrilling for users to use the Internet always new and exciting, can we say that about typical textbooks?

B. Educators need to evaluate the authenticity of the information on the webpages that they are including in the curriculum. Anybody can build a web site and publish more or less what they want on their site. This means that there are vast amounts of reliable information but just as much unreliable information posted for unsuspecting readers to use. Information has to be looked at critically by educators and as well as by the students.

C. In a language learning class, information needs to be shared by all learners. It would be beneficial for all of the learners to post their important web sites that they have discovered due to the vast amounts of sites on the Net. Gathering data from important sites requires a huge amount of search time, sharing sites provides learners with an additional bonus of developing a network system between other learners and groups.

D. As will all aspects of classroom activities, educators need to be prepared. It is worth the time to prepare carefully especially when one is using the Internet. It is highly recommended to check Web pages that one might have used in the past before a lesson because Web pages may have been altered in appearance or upgraded with new software. Due to these technical problems, teachers might need to have

alternative activities prepared as a back up.

E. The Internet is always in a state of rapid change, it is constantly developing, and reinventing itself with newer systems and applications. Teachers need to be more explorative because new software systems can offer new possibilities for language learning that no-one has thought of yet. Educators need to take occasional risks by being more creative in their choice of activities and curriculum development for language teaching. Teachers need to challenge themselves by using their imagination. All possibilities need to be explored.

The World Wide Web (WWW) offers a system for realizing some ideals of learner centered second language assessment such as test-taking at the learner's convenience and providing immediate and specific feedback to learners that traditional classes cannot immediately provide.

F. Patience needs to be cultivated. Due to system problems, the Web can sometimes run very slowly or certain Web pages cannot be retrieved. Should this unfortunate problem arise during a lesson, postpone the search to a later time. Due to user traffic, certain sites seem to run at slower speeds than at other times of the day. Inaccessible sites then become visible when user traffic diminishes. Educators need to have a few sites to use should they encounter this type of problem.

G. Users of the Internet need to be organized. It is easy to read numerous Web pages and forget their URLs when users need to use them again in the future. When visiting important sites, users need to Bookmark or to save important sites as Favorites in order to retrieve valuable information in the future. Students as well as teachers need to get into the habit of saving URLs.

## Censorship

There is little censorship on the Web and because of this, educators can come across pages that they object to, as well as other content that educators would rather students not have access to during class. Learning institutions need to use certain software or install firewalls to curb the access of certain undesirable Websites and Webpages from their student population. Software will tackle this problem; there are programs that specify which sites students have access to, as well as filter particular sites that utilize certain words that are considered offensive.

Languages, such as English, are cognitive systems, but they also express ideas and transmit cultural values. When teachers discuss language use with their students, it is important to include information on the social, cultural, and historical context that certain language forms carry for native speakers. Often these explanations include reference to what a native speaker would say, and why. Using different types

of websites will illustrate the different types of ideas being portrayed.

Culture, especially from English speaking countries like the US and UK, is expressed and transmitted through magazines and newspapers, radio and television programs, movies, and the internet. Using media as authentic materials in the classroom can expand students' perspectives and generate interesting discussions about the relationships between language and culture.

As an example, if we take data from the following websites (yahoo.com, ca.yahoo.com, uk.yahoo.com, au.yahoo.com), they are all from English speaking countries such as the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia, but they are all designed differently. Each country's webpage design is significantly different in either: color, size, wording, section, and so on. Though they share the same language, they do not share the same culture. Even their word choice is different; one of these countries might have a "car" section, while another might have an "automobile" section, and another might categorize it as a "vehicle" section. These types of differences should be mentioned in English language classes in Japan. A person named MacDonald is not the same as a McDonald, just ask any Irish or English about this.

## Search Engines

Many times a person may not have the address, in this case he/she needs to use a Search Engine. This is a page where he/she can find lists of web pages related to a given aspect. When a person accesses one of these pages, enormous amounts of information will be found, but there will always be a space where the person can type clue words or a question regarding the topic that he/she wants to know about. After writing this information, a click of a mouse will be needed on the Search button. In a few seconds a list of web pages that might help will be shown. Then simply click on one of these addresses and the person will be taken to that specific page. If the information is not exactly what is desired, one can always hit the return button on the top of the computer screen and choose a different address.

Many times several pages containing the topic searched for can be found, in this case a click on the phrase 'next page' usually appears at the end of the information. Sometimes, numbers representing the quantity of pages found is displayed. One can go to the next page by clicking on the next page number. A new page with new addresses will soon come up. The way that this system was designed makes it simple and easy for everybody to use regardless of a person's internet skill level.

## Managing a lesson

Once students start using computers, the attention in the classroom is diverted away from the teacher and towards the tasks at hand. This presents the teacher with more time to focus on particular individuals or groups that need additional help or further guidance than normal classes could provide. Teachers have the flexibility to provide students with vast amounts of material and from a variety of levels to choose from; the students can then choose the particular material that they want to work with. These types of lessons stimulate students to become more autonomous and self-directed learners.

In order to learn a language, instead of merely learning about it, students need as much as possible to hear and read the language as native speakers use it. The World Wide Web is a rich resource for authentic materials. From websites like yahoo.com, students can listen and watch current music videos. Students can see some of the current international trends as well as listen to some of the English slang or new speech patterns being used in other English speaking countries. The students can get an authentic experience of understanding and using English because they are prepared after doing listening and viewing activities; they are aware of the context in which it occurs.

Activities need to be found that have an instructional purpose; ordinarily, people communicate to convey information. Activities in the language classroom simulate communication outside the classroom when they are structured this way. In these classroom activities, students use the language to fill an information gap by getting answers or expanding a partial understanding. There are many websites that have specifically designed sections for students to use English, learners can perform individual, pair, or group tasks such as solving problems, developing plans, and working together to complete projects like making a video, creating a crossword puzzle, or giving a demonstration, and so on.

Educators should integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing into classroom activities. By asking students to use two or more modes, instructors create activities that imitate real world language use. A teacher should try to bring content from a students' field of study into the language curriculum. As an example, University students often find it instructive to read, discuss, and write about material whose content they already know, because their knowledge of the topic helps them understand and use the language. They are able to scaffold: to build on existing knowledge as they increase their language proficiency.

For students who plan to study and/or work in a field that will require them to use the language they are learning, integration of content can be a powerful

motivator. If an educator is teaching English to a class of Japanese Business Administration students, information taken from known Fortune 500 companies' websites should be used in their English class, using fictitious company names and data will not mimic the real world; dubious data such as widgets will not help students with other types of classes because of their abstractness and lack of relevance.

### Why use the internet for language learning?

The Internet creates cross-curricular work. Students involved in language learning develop skills and strategies similar to those that they need for other subjects in the curriculum. Resources and information found in the language class will often be relevant to other classes because English is the main language used in the research, academic, and business world. Students need to understand and utilize English written information. Due to the prevalence of English written information, students are presented with an additional way to practice their language learning skills while learning other subjects.

The Internet has begun transforming language learning by offering educators and students enormous amounts of information and resources for all of them to use as long as they know how to find and to use these Websites. Information on just about any subject and resource can be found just a click of a mouse away.

Articles, music, books, audio and video clips, poems, images and pictures, and software can be accessed easily and at one's convenience. The Internet provides learners, from the four corners of the world, with an opportunity to interact with each other cheaply, quickly, safely, and reliably. The classroom is opened up in a new way that was never possible even 10 years ago. People from all around the globe (in different classes, from different economic backgrounds, and from various cultural groups) are able to communicate and to share ideas with each other in a new global learning community.

Research has found that text reading and web reading, while sharing some similarities, require a different balance of strategies. Adult language learners, especially those with limited previous experience with the Web, may therefore need explicit, scaffolded instruction in order to read the Web.

Students and teachers can start to use the Internet as a source of material for learning and for teaching in the same way that they use audio, (radio, CD,...) and video (television, VHS, DVD, ...), books, magazines, and newspapers. The internet provides a quicker alternative to written printed information due to the technological advances in audio and video communication available on all major

Websites. New and important information can be posted on a Webpage in a matter of seconds compared to a conventional communicative written resource that requires weeks of printing preparation.

Lastly, computers are worth using in the language classroom because of their potential to motivate learners. Just because students seem to enjoy using computers does not guarantee that their enthusiasm will cross over to language learning. Their learning activities have to be designed in a manner for them to enjoy learning language with this medium. Students need to feel the benefits of their classroom tasks and assignments that they do using the Internet. Just like any new teaching resource, students need to be constantly monitored and motivated.

### **Analyzing an English learning website**

I recommend to all English teachers teaching to Japanese students to visit the site at [www.ManyThings.org](http://www.ManyThings.org). It was created by Charles I. Kelly and Lawrence E. Kelly who have been living and teaching in Japan for numerous years. The site is for people studying English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The site was specifically designed for Japanese students; there is an English study menu in Japanese in case the students do not understand the English words on the website.

The site has numerous sections such as quizzes, word games, word puzzles, proverbs, slang expressions, anagrams, a random-sentence generator and other computer assisted language learning activities. The learning activities can be assigned by the teachers during class time as well as for a follow up; other activities can be assigned as homework to complement prior, present, or future in-class learning activities.

The website is really easy to use; it is uncluttered, readable, and easy to navigate. The site has many levels incorporated into the activities, a new Japanese student learning English for the first time can enjoy using it as well as a native English speaker.

The pages are quickly loaded and the site is rapid to use; there is no waiting time for the students to lose interest in learning while the webpage sets up. Students can feel safe about not having to log in or register before using the site, there's nothing more irritating than receiving unwanted spam from after registering at a site that promises not to give out your information to a third party.

The information posted on the website is accurate; there are no doubtful pieces of information incorporated into the learning activities. As an example, if there are historical or geographical questions included in an English learning section, the



information is correct, the facts have been checked as well as the spelling.

It is visually appealing and fun to use; there are various types of visuals used such as “flash based” images, some special “plugins”, and MP3 sounds. The site is not irritating to use, many times a person will get fed up of a site because of the same animated images, advertising, and needless scrolling.

The site is intended for educational purposes, the website designers are not interested in putting advertising on their website, there are no advertisements such as “pop-ups” anywhere for students to be distracted from their English learning experience. Educators do not believe that all learners are the same. Yet visits to schools throughout the world might convince us otherwise. Too often, educators continue to treat all learners alike while paying lip service to the principle of diversity.

In traditional classroom, the teacher will lecture and the students will listen and take notes and might have time to ask question at the end of the lecture time permitting. By incorporating the internet in an English learning class, Japanese students can learn English in a non-threatening environment from a free website like ManyThings.org.

Teachers know that students learn in different ways; the experience in the classroom confirms this every day. In addition, well-accepted theories and extensive research illustrate and document learning differences. For the visual learners, there are many informative “flash” based images that students will find fun to use. For the auditory learner, the website offers easy to install and to use English Podcasts on various English components such as grammar, vocabulary, proverbs, nominal pairs, and idioms.

Most educators can talk about learning differences, whether by the name of learning styles, cognitive styles, psychological type, or multiple intelligences. Learners bring their own individual approach, talents and interests to the learning situation. The website is always updated and maintained, there is the right amount of “bells and whistles” for creative thinkers to enjoy.

The “ManyThings” website incorporates many types of learning activities for all kinds of learners. There are easy to difficult written activities, listening activities, speaking activities, and reading activities.

At present, schools are heavily biased toward uniformity over diversity. Including an Internet lesson provides a valuable alternative to a student’s learning environment. Japanese students adore using new technology, just look at them always buying and using the latest cell phones on the market. An appropriate balance must be determined thoughtfully with attention to beliefs, theories, and research rather than efficiency. Educators need to decide what should be uniform for

all students and what should be diverse in the curriculum and strive toward putting into practice what is necessary into a well balanced language lesson. As educators, we need to focus and make learning not just a class activity but a life long goal and objective, whatever the discipline or subject matter. The material also needs to be accessible at a learner's convenience, one of the strength of the internet.

## Conclusion

According to Cornell (2002)<sup>5</sup> we need to be cautious that the internet does not turn into a "just-in-time" solution. Many of our corporations today are leaning towards this approach for development of various English learning programs. We need to consider the traditions in other cultures and blend these with a new approach to learning. A continuation of life-long learning as changes in our technologies grow will increase the need for English language learning. As Cornell (2002) suggested, we must be aware of the powerful influence culture and mindset has on the way we see the world. As technology changes, so do changes occur in the marketplace.

Classroom education is expanding from the classroom and into the homes of students. Businesses are more customer- oriented, which raises the demand for customized programs with shorter development time. Cornell concludes that the one major reality is that technology such as the internet is a valuable tool that empowers the student to learn at their rate and at their convenience. Internet English language classes are changing the landscape of the traditional classroom, educators need to adapt and incorporate this wonderful user-friendly tool into their lessons. In the Finance Week (2004) article on empowerment, the author believes that we should drop the "one size fits all" approach to the development of curricula by catering to the "specific needs of individuals and groups"<sup>6</sup>. Finally, if you include the internet into your English language lessons, you will be doing exactly what students and their parents are hoping for, for a balanced learning program that utilizes all of the advantages of a traditional classroom and all of the strengths of the internet. Since we live in a highly competitive technological society like Japan, the Japanese students not using the internet, especially in an English classroom, will all get "left behind".

## ENDNOTES

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