

In this article, first published in EL GAZETTE, Clarity's Andrew Stokes considers how we should use the Internet in the classroom.

ICT - Getting caught up in the Web

Like human interaction, the Internet involves a large degree of unpredictability. A well-planned lesson can crash because an article has been removed from a website; lesson planning itself can fall foul of an overloaded home connection. So, given the grief it can cause, why are teachers increasingly bringing the Web into their teaching?

The answer, I think, can be found in that very unreliability and spontaneity. For the first time in the history of language teaching we are able to bring our students into an authentic, unpredictable English language environment without having to leave the classroom. Let's examine how this can be done by looking at three Web-based activities that have successfully exploited the potential of the Web, and contrasting them with less effective approaches.

Three successful Web-based activities...

Chris Smith, an ICT specialist in Thailand, believes the Web and email can dramatically enhance student autonomy by integrating English into other subject areas. He introduces students to www.askanexpert.com. This US-based site links students with experts on a range of subjects from fine art to seismology: students ask questions and, within a week, can expect a reply. So a student working on a project on earthquakes who is stumped over the difference between foreshocks and aftershocks has a way of finding the answer through a brief but personal interaction in English.

Andrés Guerrero, an English teacher in Spain, planned a school study trip to the UK by visiting tourist office websites. His intermediate students worked out how to get from the airport to the town they were visiting, examined options for accommodation and decided which day trips they would take. They emailed queries to tourist office personnel and received replies. This task-based approach is much more than the simulation of native speaker-type interaction that we normally find in the ELT classroom; the activity provides completely authentic English language behaviour.

Similarly, Web-based research provides an opportunity for IELTS candidates to operate in an academic environment in English. Clarity's *STUDY SKILLS Success* includes an activity where students prepare an essay on GM food by visiting firstly a University of California site, and secondly the New Scientist GM food special report. This exercise provides extensive reading and note taking practice in a native speaker context. The teacher could go further by setting up Internet search activities to enable students to find more data, and by helping them to develop criteria for evaluating the websites they find.

... and two less successful ones

Unfortunately, activities of this type appear to be the exception. Of the two Web-based lessons I most recently observed, one was focused on a Commonwealth Games reading comprehension text which had been captured and downloaded onto the school intranet; students answered questions on paper, while consulting the text on the monitor. The other was grammar practice involving rather poorly designed multiple choice activities on an ELT website. Why

do these exercises fail to exploit the opportunities of the Web?

A clear distinction has to be drawn between lessons where the Web is the vehicle and those where it is the objective. The fact that the first three activities were conducted via the Web was almost incidental to the lessons' aims: the point was to undertake specific tasks using authentic materials. In the second two lessons, the teachers had decided that it was exciting for the students to be on the Web *per se*.

There seems little point, though, in doing a reading comprehension on a screen rather than on paper. It is more difficult to read and unless there is some over-riding reason for going online - such as being able to link to other relevant materials - the probable reason for doing so is simply to appear modern. The same applies to interactive grammar practice: there is no doubt that the computer is a great motivator for students, but it is the quality of the materials that should be the deciding factor in their use in a lesson, not the medium through which they are delivered. It is, therefore, crucial for us to think about exactly why we choose to incorporate the Internet into a particular lesson and to avoid using it simply because it is a new technology.

Will schools pay?

No discussion of the Internet in ELT can side-step technical considerations. It is a sad truth that many schools wish to use computer-based resources without being prepared to pay for them - really, any institution which is serious about using electronic materials should have a dedicated technical support person, but few are prepared to commit to this expense. The result is that when the system goes down - and the Internet is still not as stable as we would like it to be - the teacher has to try to solve the problem herself. She therefore needs to decide whether the benefits of using the new technology are going to outweigh the potential disruption and disappointment.

The good news is that this is changing as the platform becomes more reliable. There seems no doubt that as technologies stabilise and teachers begin to make informed choices about when to expand the mini-world of the ELT lesson into the wider world of the Web, the Internet will become a resource that not only brings the class to life but also brings real life into the classroom.

Website reference

1. Connect to 'real world experts from astronauts to bookkeepers':
www.askanexpert.com
2. Chris Smith's website designed to support the international school community:
www.shambles.net
3. Study Skills Success:
www.IELTSpractice.com
www.ClarityEnglish.com
4. More worksheets on Web-based research:
<http://www.ieltspractice.com/research.html>

Clarity has a mission to help teachers integrate ICT successfully into their teaching. Please contact us at any time for advice on which programs to use and how to use them effectively with your students.



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