

EWA MAJEWSKA

Use of the Internet in Teaching English to Business Students*

What exactly is the Internet?

Some people call it an “Information Superhighway”, some say that it is a library which is five minutes old. Its image is quite complex, but to cut the long story short we may say that it is a cyberspace navigated by computer users on the world’s largest computer network where people throughout the world exchange an immeasurable amount of information, electronic mail, news, pictures, resources, and ideas.

How did it all begin?

At first the Internet was a popular means for scientists and researchers to communicate and share their ideas with one another, but soon it was gaining in popularity outside this scientific community (largely due to college students wanting access to electronic mail). However, at first the Internet required an intimate knowledge of computers and network-operating systems, a knowledge that most ordinary users neither had the time nor the interest to acquire. Soon the researchers came up with so called **gopher**, a network standard which could guide the user from one file to another, as well as from one computer to another. It was a simple idea: a person could point with a mouse to a piece of information (such as a title of an article) and actually download that information. But gopher has some serious limitations. Firstly, it is limited to presenting text files only. Secondly, all gopher menus look pretty the same, so it’s not unusual to get lost. Besides taking educational aspects of using gopher in the classrooms, it must be said that it is not attractive to young students and it is not popular with our students at all.

WWW

Anyway, of all the recent developments in advanced computer networking, it is the World Wide Web (also known as W3 and WWW) that has truly captured

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the imagination of millions technophiles and information buffs. In contrast to the gopher however, the Web offered some fascinating new features. For example, so called hypertext has been developed. It is an easier method of navigating the Internet where you can highlight certain words within a paragraph and by selecting these words with a mouse you can link to another document on the Internet. These pages in turn can offer additional links to even more specific information. And beyond its general ease of navigation, besides offered segments of text, it may also include graphics, audio even video and it creates a new dimension to cyberspace, full of images, sounds and ideas. By means of the Web you can chat with friends in the States, view paintings from the National Gallery in London or download the latest news from the BBC, or even participate in live videoconferencing with another students from different school. Since its popularisation in 1993, the Web had caught on as wildfire in business, research and academia, and it also started to be recognised as a powerful educational tool.

Interactivity in teaching and learning

Probably the most important point that must be addressed in relation to the use of Internet in education is the current emphasis towards interactivity in the learning process. Though it must be stressed that the term “interactivity” has become somewhat of a “buzzword” in Polish and not only in Polish pop culture, teaching and commerce — for example some educational software packages attempt to add to their appeal by emphasising the product’s “interactive nature”. In other words, the way it is understood is that passive learning doesn’t work, yet interactive learning works wonders. But to be honest we must say that students of all ages learn better when they are actively engaged in a process of learning, no matter whether that process comes in the form of a sophisticated multimedia package or a law-tech classroom debate on current events. Anyway, I think the time has come to change this traditional notion of the passive classroom environment into more interactive teaching. Old ways of teaching and studying need some serious restructuring, as today’s young people need to be competitive in tomorrow’s marketplace, and yesterday’s pedagogical methodology is no longer enough.

Traditional teaching versus interactive one

One of the key reasons why the traditional teaching may fail with some students is the fact that students have no longer use nor interest in much the material as it is presented (textbooks, even colourful don’t make them feel as if they were part of a given subject matter). In order to expand their understanding of a given subject, they must become involved in the entire teaching process.

For example, let’s take into consideration the textbook “Insights into Business”

written by Michael Lannon, Graham Tullis and Tonya Trappe, which we use to teach upper intermediate business students in our school. One of the units tries to familiarise the students with the problem of recruitment. As any other textbook, the unit includes a lead-in passage which presents letters of application and job vacancies, then a text on appearance that counts with many Managers follows. There are also follow-up questions to be discussed. Everything is perfectly arranged but still the students approach the texts in rather passive way, and they are not fascinated by the whole idea of job hunting. Of course they recognise the need to understand the text, they learn new vocabulary, they even try to write their own CVs and application letters but, introducing the Internet into classrooms enables them to search the real job market in the UK or the USA or all over the world, if they feel like doing it. They can surf the sites devoted to job hunting and they can search for different positions as well as they can place their own announcements. They can get help from the Online Career Centre or find actual interview questions, or lists of commercial organisations supplying job databases of other services for Human Resources. Possibilities are endless, but the point is to make students involved, then they invest more mental energy and thus commit the concept to memory with better comprehensive understanding of the problem. Students, when encouraged and given proper opportunity and medium, can grasp the meaning of the subject, and thus understand it better and memorise it faster with better comprehension.

Below you will find a list of the most popular WWW sites on job openings advertised on the Internet.

CALL Cookbook

(<http://www.owlnet.rice.edu/~ling417/>)

Business Meetings

(<http://www.stir.ac.uk/epd/>)

English Language Teaching

(<http://www.stir.ac.uk/epd/higdox/stephen/elt.htm>)

English Teaching/Learning Materials

(<http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/staff/visitors/kenji/kiato/material.htm>)

ESL Teacher Connection

(<http://www.sils.umich.edu/~jarmour/etc/etchome.html>)

Heinemann English Language Teaching

(<http://www.heinemann.co.uk/heinemann/elt/index.htm>)

Photocopiable Worksheets

(<http://www.heinemann.co.uk/heinemann/elt/resource/wksht.html>)

ESL Links Page for Students

(<http://www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/student.html>)

Interesting Links for ESL Teachers

(<http://polyglot.cal.msu.edu/mitesol/linkseslteachers.html>)

ESL/EFL Links for Students

(<http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/ESL2.html>)

Volterre Web Links for Teachers

(<http://www.wfi.fr/volterre/weblinktch.html>)

BEN Employment Opportunities

(<http://tism.bevc.blacksburg.va.us/employment.html>)

ESL Job Center

(<http://www.pacificnet.net/sperling/jobcentre.html>)

Times Higher Education Supplement

(<http://timeshigher.newsint.co.uk/>)

Information on Work Abroad

(<http://www.istc.umn.edu>)

The briefcase Virtual Interview

(<http://student.studentcentre.com/brief/virtual/virtual.htm>)

Teachers may use the Internet for reinforcement of concepts already learned in the classrooms. It is so exciting to see the students enthusiastic when they find information we have talked about in class. It seems to give the subject we teach, or matters we explain more credibility because they know they are accessing real-world information that is out there on the Internet. Besides, they can use the Internet for practical applications of what they have learned in theory. This will encourage them to apply what they have learned using the Internet as a tool, and in this way it could be highly motivating for them.

Even for those who are not particularly Web-oriented it is still quite easy to download over the Internet. Using the Web as an educational tool is a simple matter even for young learners, so anyone with the will and time to explore the Internet is bound to discover a variety of fascinating sites and resources. The most essential problem is to find out where to begin, what to look for and what to ignore. There are many well-developed so-called search engines, which will surf the Internet for you looking for requested information. It is now possible for a user to connect to so-called “spiders” or “crawlers” which are the most valuable tools on the Internet. Thus those search engines will help you to find what you are looking for. All you have to do is to type in your query into a box, click on the submit button, and in seconds a list of matching clickable links appears.

Some of the most popular search engines include: Alta Vista, HotBot, Infoseek, Lycos, Veronica Gateway, Webcrawler or Yahoooligan. The search takes time, but the results can be dazzling.

And here arises the problem of integrating the Internet into our classrooms. Of course, just like any planning it takes time to prepare the class, and the more time you spend preparing before classes the better the students respond. The most time consuming part of integrating the Internet is finding sites that will work for the unit you are currently doing. Just about any topic will have a few web sites you can use. The key is to visit them before your students do. But we should take one thing into consideration: Don't use the Internet as an "I don't know what else to do, so I will take them to the Internet lab classes". That's the good way to lead students into trouble. And what is more, never take a group of students and set them loose on the Internet. This is just asking for trouble. Treat the Internet Lab seriously. It takes much preparation and discipline to carry it off successfully. The teacher must have pre- and post lab questions that make sure that students have taken advantage of sites they surfed. They need direction and purpose when using the Internet for educational purposes or they will surf to a page about naked Brad Pitt rather than Richard Branson's Virgin airline. It is also good to let them know that if they are found on a page that has nothing to do with the topic at hand, they will not again be allowed to work on the Internet. It is also useful to stress to students that it is very easy for the teacher to tell where they have been, as it is easy to see every screen they have been to, and links change colour after they have been visited. The more the students know how it works, the less problems the teacher will find down the road. But the best way to keep the students on task is to have tangible goals. They need to know exactly what their purpose is, so this is why a good lesson plan is a basic requirement for successful Internet classes. The teacher must prepare a good hand-out including at least four addresses that he or she knows contains the information he or she wants them to find. The teacher must explain what search engine he or she wants them to use. It could also be helpful to give them some keywords beforehand so, as they could comprehend the topics more easily and quickly.

There is one more thing worth mentioning here that is credibility of information on the Internet. Whenever working with students who are researching information on the Internet you should remind them that anyone can put information on the World Wide Web and there is no way to check its sources. Information will not always be 100% correct. If information that has been printed in magazines or books conflicts with what is found on the Internet, you should tell the students to prefer the magazine or text. You should particularly be careful with commercial sites. But in order to avoid serious mistakes why not researching full-text newspapers, magazines, journals, reference works and even whole books on line? With a few touches at a keyboard a person can get access to electronic

libraries or Virtual Libraries and you can look through conference papers, reports, research articles and other authentic materials which can be obtained from proved sources. Current events can provide many educational experiences especially for business students who want to find up-to date information on current matters. Thus students can visit BBC News or CNN News on line. All these television networks provide a valuable educational tool for both teachers and students.

Though the idea of authenticity is receiving a lot of attention in the language teaching, the teacher should remember that lessons must not only be informative but communicative as well, and what is more they must reflect the real communication needs of the students. In teaching business students we have got to keep up with current business practices. In their highly competitive situations they have to learn the newest, most efficient communication technologies. Thus teachers must adopt and teach these technologies.

In that context, e-mail, or in another words Electronic Mail, the most popular way to communicate on the Internet can no longer be considered a new development. E-mail has been an integral component of business communication and for many students of business English, e-mail is the predominant form of writing. So to meet the writing needs of these students, e-mail must be emphasised. So with the ability to instantly and easily communicate with students from almost anywhere in the world, business students can exchange messages, as well as participate in discussions with key pals (that are pen pals via the Internet). There are many Internet locations as eMail Classroom Exchange, or E-Mail Key Pal Connection, or ESL Student Email Connection for Students, which you could find quite useful in your computer labs. But you should remind your students that E-mail messages are somewhat like postcards: you never know who might read the message. Be careful what you write or you may find yourself in trouble. Anyway after a while your students will find out that they are E-mail Junkies when they start introducing themselves as: "EwaMajewska at MWSE dot tarnow dot com dot pl", or you will find yourself telling a taxi driver that you live at [http//1000.edison.garden/house/brick.html](http://1000.edison.garden/house/brick.html) or you start tilting your head sideways to smile. :-), as this is the way we read "smileys" or emoticons, which are very popular ways of expressing our emotions via the Internet.

Emoticons

Sometimes words are not enough to make messages feel more like personal contact. So newsgroup participants started to use punctuation marks on an ordinary keyboard to make expressive faces at each other. To read these signs you have to tilt your head to your left shoulder. These signs are called "smileys".

The basic "smiley" is: :-). In context it means "I'm happy to hear from you". Sometimes they are used in place of voice inflection to express sarcastic or joking statement.

The "smiley" can also wink, as in "tongue in cheek":

;-) and even frown :-). This one is indifferent; better than a frown but not as good as happy:

:-I.

This is a list of most useful smileys:

:-) A LIST OF MOST COMMON SMILEYS

(-: Writer is left handed

%-) has been staring at a green screen for 15 hours straight

:*) drunk

[:] a robot

8-) wearing sunglasses on head

::-) wears normal glasses

(:-) is Jewish

B-) wears horn-rimmed glasses

:-} has a moustache

:-} wears lipstick

{:-) a toupee

:-[is a vampire

:-E a bucktoothed vampire

:-F a bucktoothed vampire with one tooth missing

:-7 made a wry statement

:-* ate something sour

:-)~ drools

:-~) has a cold

:'(is crying

:') so happy, s/he's crying

:-@ screaming

:^) has a broken nose

:v) has a broken nose, but it's the other way

:_) nose is sliding off of his face

:-& tongue tied

:-) a punk rocker

:-((real punk rockers don't smile)

:=) has two noses

?-) shaved off one of his eyebrows this morning

,:-) same thing...other side

-I asleep

:-Q a smoker

:-? smokes a pipe

O-) a scuba diver

O:-) an angel (at heart, at least)

:-S an incoherent statement

:0-D laughing (at you!)

The possibility for education on the Web is amazing. In fact, the Web is becoming the most popular medium for the delivery of instructional materials. The ever-growing interest of students as well as teachers is stimulating more and more the creation of web sites devoted to teaching and learning. Materials and resources delivered over the Web are powerful and useful tools for language teaching and learning since they provide students with additional and supplemental language materials in nearly all areas of language learning. It can be difficult for teachers to find the time or energy to learn a new way of teaching, or to search out on-line resources; and in most cases a teacher would rather stick to traditional curricular method instead of surfing the Net. But on the other hand it is unfair to deny students' access to the greatest learning tool available today. The Internet is now beginning to take off in the educational field, and technology promises to be just that — a new way to teach. And it can't be denied that the use of that technology for language teaching and learning is much more effective, motivating and challenging than the use of the traditional classroom tools: pen, paper, whiteboard marker and a book. Besides, it's not as scary as you might think.

Talking about advantages of the Web one should mention something like computer conferencing. And again, interactivity is the strongest asset here. It develops written communication skills, it facilitates collaborative discussions, and it develops the independence and self-directed approach of the learner. The learners can benefit from the expertise of other learners; it is motivating for the learners and it facilitates interaction among people from different cultural backgrounds, because it is easier to write in a second language than to speak the language. Participants can enter and leave the conference as they wish. Unfortunately there is no pressure to respond so this could be a disadvantage as it could lead to chaos, and overwhelming number of messages and there is a chance for online rows. Using both e-mail or computer conferencing during language laboratories it is very important to consider if the students are good writers or readers as it is essential. It is also important to know how people think of new technologies. New technologies can motivate certain people, but can also provoke strong negative reactions from others. Another problem is how much control is allowed to the students. Are they allowed to set up their own conference, how about their time limits for them being online? In opinion of most teachers control over the content of conferences should be introduced.

Taking into account everything that has been presented here, one can conclude that there are more pros than cons to the use of the Internet as a modern tool of teaching. Undoubtedly, further studies on online teaching must be carried out to come to any conclusion on its effectiveness in the learning processes. But judging by the feedback received from business students it can be affirmed that the Internet, especially when used interactively, can be of great value to motivate them in a study of a foreign language. Besides, being actively involved in surfing the

Internet adds flavour to the regular meat-and-potatoes classroom studies of a foreign language.

As the World Wide Web becomes more accessible to schools around the country, teachers and students alike will be able to explore cyberspace and design new resources for a multitude of purposes that have yet to be realised.

