Using the Internet to Improve EFL Through Reading and Writing for Communicative Purposes

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Abstract

The Internet provides new opportunities both to teach and learn English and to use it in practical, authentic and interesting ways. In particular, the potential for using the Internet to teach English in China is significant -- many Chinese students are anxious to make practical use of the Internet, but lack direction in how to effectively use it to further their education in English. The Internet provides a quick, inexpensive vehicle for making these linkages. However, using the Internet to teach English in China still faces some challenges. Internet access should be available and reliable; the teacher's strategies in the design and organization of internet use are key to the success of Internet implementation in EFL classes. These are the major lessons learned from an Internet-based English reading and writing class, involving a U.S. based Web site and more than 50 students at a University in central China.

Key terms: internet-based teaching, teaching of reading and writing

1. Foundations

English language education in China often struggles with a perplexing irony - most Chinese students spend years studying English (as many as eight years for some high school graduates and 10 years for most college students), focusing on reading and grammar exercises and on writing, and yet they find it difficult to use it for practical communication. Most students find it frustrating to move beyond basic skills and into fluent and effective communication. Part of the reason lies in the unidimensional approach of teaching English in a traditional classroom. The emphasis of Chinese English education generally focuses on reading, grammar exercises and test-guided writing. Using the same textbook, students face predictable content and assignments that don't engage them to "think" in English. Many English teachers in classrooms today still use the same methods by which they were taught English. Memorization of words and rules plays a large role in primary and secondary schools in China (Liao, 2000, 2004). Often, English teaching reflects methods used to teach Chinese children their first language. Teachers focus the majority of their efforts on English grammar and vocabulary, which are key components of crucial English tests that play a prominent role in deciding which schools students will enter and whether they will earn a degree. With limited interaction in the teacher-centered and test-driven EFL classroom, students don't learn the language for authentic, communicative purposes, and thus they don't approach automaticity or fluency in using the language. Current approaches to EFL in China reflect traditional and cultural approaches to language learning education. This is changing to reflect changing philosophies and theories of language learning, though the process is slow and difficult (Liao, 2000). The Chinese government has attempted to aid efforts to teach English by allowing native English speakers to come to China and teach English. However, the results have been inconsistent. Native speaking English teachers are not always well-trained; they are from a Western culture and educational background and they face pressure to "teach to the

exam" to help students pass English exams they will face before graduation from high school and college.

China has made some big strides in incorporating new technologies and methodologies (see Hu 2002; Zhong & Shen, 2002) into EFL education, to ultimately improve learning outcomes. Information communications technology is expanding throughout the Chinese educational context. There is a wide availability of computer technology, and a keen interest in use of it, which could be applied to English learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Zhao, 2003). As Zhong & Shen (2002) point out, "A new educational reform, which emphasizes the integration of new technologies into the curriculum, is surging in China with an increased momentum…it appears that there is a general consensus, or expectation that a kind of technology-induced pedagogy, known as 'Multimedia EFL teaching', is emerging in China" (p.39).

Using information communications technologies, particularly the Internet, provides new opportunities for both learners and teachers. One of the most advantageous features of the Internet is the way it includes aspects of multimedia and hypermedia currently being used in education (Collins et al., 1997; Warschauer et al., 2000). Technological advances promise great potential for both synchronous and asynchronous communication in English in addition to reading and grammar materials with clickable hypertext links on the WWW. The use of video-conferencing technology enables students to have face-to-face conversations online with native speakers (Warschauer et al., 2000). Might new technologies, such as the Internet, offer a panacea for EFL teaching problems in China, such as lack of motivation and a meaningful learning environment, authentic language input, and opportunities for real-life communication?

Through a friendship formed by way of an Internet mail list, I became acquainted with an American ESL postgraduate, the course partner (hereafter partner), who was doing the MA course in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at an American College. We discussed the prospects for using the Internet to teach English in China, and specifically the development of a research project to teach English reading and writing via the Internet. This research was to seek answers to the questions relating to how to use authentic materials and communicative approaches to enhance EFL learning by using the Internet in China. The project was largely driven by a concern with improving EFL practice, and trying to evaluate how effective Internet intervention in the EFL class was in a Chinese context in improving the quality of practice. Applied research is positive about the possibility of improving practice (Wallace & Poulson, 2002). The partner and I, a lecturer of EFL at a University in central China, were able to develop a structure for the research project. The American College gave support to the research project, particularly by hosting the Web site on a Web server and permitting the use of s licensed Web curriculum software for the project. I promoted participation in the Internet project among the students from the English classes at the Chinese University. Students received credits for taking the course, but they had to pay for their own access to the Internet in order to participate.

2. Curriculum rationale

The main goal of the Internet course curriculum was to get students to use English for authentic, communicative purposes, helping students to learn English more effectively. Secondarily, the course aimed to improve students' ability to learn grammar and vocabulary needed to pass upcoming examinations. First, it was designed to introduce and/or review grammar—such as "-ed" and "-ing" endings, the formation of questions in English and the subjunctive mood. Then the course sought to reinforce that language structure by having students use interactive Web pages and quizzes to practice usage. Finally, the grammar was again recycled by having students use it for some sort of communicative purpose in the writing assignment for the week.

The grammar selected for the Internet course was based on the assessment of grammar and types of English

structure and uses I planned to teach in my English classes. Efforts were made to blend grammar into reading and writing assignments. A variety of Web sites on the Internet provided an engaging forum for Chinese students to study grammar points essential for their preparation for important exams. At the same time, the sites, which were written in English, provided opportunities for students to read authentic English instructions and respond to them appropriately. A teacher could monitor these responses to determine if a student was growing in his understanding of the language. Other Web sites and exercises provided opportunities for students to do guided writing assignments that could "reinforce grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary...and otherwise reinforce learning" (Reid, 1993, p.231). Other assignments were not specifically tied to teaching English structure, but rather required students to use reading and writing skills to accomplish broad assignments on specific topics. For example, students were asked to select a city that they have always wanted to visit. Students were then given a couple of Web sites where they could research details for making a trip to that city. Then, they were to write their pen pals describing the city, its attractions, and their plans for traveling to and staying in the there.

The Internet curriculum sought to give students opportunities to respond in writing to the text, and provide the best opportunities for students to incorporate effective reading. Zamel (1992) suggests that writing needs to be fully integrated with reading, to write their way into reading and to discover that reading shares much in common with writing — that reading, too, is an act of composing. For example, students in the second week of the course read articles about Thomas Edison, a famous American, and then had the assignment of writing their pen pal to relate a couple of interesting facts they had learned. This required students to do more than just read some text, but also to process it and use the information as the basis for written communication. The Internet course also sought to have students process English in different ways and at increasing speeds. For example, some assignments required students to post messages or respond to comments on message boards or to take part in chat exercises, with the intent of encouraging students to think in the second language and take steps toward automaticity in communication. Such written dialogues also enable a teacher to see problems and provide a remedy appropriate for particular students.

Part of this learning process involves nudging students to begin to "think" in the language they are seeking to acquire. In using a language, people face a wide range of variables in life. For example, in organizing their writing, someone may have not enough time to organize their thoughts (such as when writing a brief note or a letter to a friend) and thus composes English extemporaneously. In contrast, a writer may spend large amounts of time researching background material, organizing and structuring the final form of the text before producing written words (such as in writing a research paper). In a typical classroom setting, the vast majority of teaching requires students to compose formal written language over an extended period. By not giving students opportunities to write English extemporaneously, students are unlikely to develop automaticity in writing. The same holds true for reading--real life forces people to read and comprehend instantaneously (such as reading road signs as a driver speeds down a highway) or without much deliberation. Typical courses provide longer time periods for reading that don't force language learners to move toward faster comprehension. Finally, although using reading and writing interactively is difficult in a classroom setting because of the static, slow turn-taking nature of written communication, the Internet-based approach was flexible enough to enable students to develop at their own pace. Students could access the site at any hour that was convenient for them, could print out material and do some of the work "off-line" in this manner.

3. Objectives

The course objectives included the following:

1) Teaching students the required grammar and vocabulary through the use of Internet Web sites, interactive drills, e-mail attachments and, eventually, through the use of reading and writing projects that incorporated natural acquisition of these components through a top-down approach.

2) Increasing students' competence in reading and writing skills, through a variety of assignments involving the use of English in authentic situations. These included communication with each other, the teacher and native-speaking English writers.

3) Using the Internet as a research tool for an end-of-term writing project. The project incorporated reading skills as well as introduced students to the process of writing, from initial idea generation to final product.

4. The coordination of the project

We decided to do the research project, we began to develop some of the parameters of the course, in terms of numbers of students, length of the project, and overall approach. I began the process of asking University officials at the Chinese University for support for the project; the support I got from the University was to give the course official status as an optional course, while Partener began to locate server space and software with which to build the Web pages. We gained support from the American College, which allowed us to store the course on one of its Web servers, and to use licenses for WebCT (Web Course Teaching) software, a template-based program that the school licenses for its faculty to use as an adjunct to on-campus classes. The use of a template-based program designed for education eliminated the need to learn the computer programming necessary to create an appropriately hierarchical Web site that would work correctly and could be easily understood by students without much guidance. For example, WebCT uses a series of named folders; a folder was set aside for each week, containing the assignments for that week.

A curriculum outline was agreed upon by the researchers. After we worked out assignments for the first 10 weeks of the course. Then the assignments were posted on the The American WebCT Web site that students were to access for the course. Assignments were written in Microsoft Word, then "saved as" Hyper Text Markup Language documents (HTML), which then could be posted on the Web site. The WebCT software provides a template into which the text is placed and offers a clear, relatively simple hierarchical folder-based system for course materials. Also on the site, it has capabilities for leaving messages, multiple chat rooms and private e-mail.

E-mail addresses for interested Chinese students were obtained by one of the students Tom, who was very interested and excited about the course, provided between 20 and 25 names and e-mail addresses. Tom also served as an intermediary between the teachers and the students to handle problems and to prod them to use features of the Web site that they did not feel comfortable using. Student interest was high; about 50 students contacted us asking to participate in the class, and we were not able to find sufficient pen pals for all students. About a dozen students from The American College volunteered for the effort; another four to five friends of the partner's got involved; and the Partner was able to enlist about 20 pen pals from his workplace office.

5. Problems of the course

Students entered the project with a great deal of excitement in the first few weeks. Also, it soon became apparent that the Chinese students were being hampered by slow Internet access speeds. Because the University declined to back the course and provide free on-campus Internet access, the students were accessing the Internet

at their own expense. I had been using a private phone line to access the Internet. At that time in the city where the University is, as in many Chinese cities, the least expensive venues for public access to the Internet were Internet cafes, which charge students two yuan per hour of access. However, access to the Internet is slow; I found that it wasn't unusual for 15 to 20 computers to share one phone line for Internet access at that time, resulting in depressingly slow download times. Slow downloads and limited technology severely limited the chances for students to participate in some aspects of the course. Finally, slow Internet access rates made it impossible to conduct some of the chat exercises planned for the course. Some students dropped the course. It is very difficult for American or British people to appreciate the frustration of slow Internet access and design web sites accordingly. The situation is changing in China. Now in many cities and most universities wideband service is improved and students have Internet access to the network on campus with much better speed.

6. Student and teacher assessments

As part of the participation in the class, the students gave us brief compositions by e-mail in which they assessed the Internet course, listing both its strong points and areas needing improvement. I also forwarded all 20 of the assessments to the partner, and we assessed them to find overarching trends that are significant. Not surprisingly, 17 of the 20 students who assessed the course said the opportunity to write to pen pals was one of the main attractions of the course. I observed that the many students cherished the opportunity to write to a native-English speaker. For the first time, the students got a native English-speaking friend to communicate in English. The students were highly motivated; they practiced English more and more in order to write and talk to their friends better. They also had more concentration in the classroom and they had more questions to ask. They learned to express their thoughts and think in English. The students were thus intrinsically motivated to learn English, which provided a powerful incentive to work on and improve their use of English, even stronger than the draw of passing upcoming English examinations. "The essence of the language is communication," writes Sherry, one of the students. "Somebody praising you that you speak very good English is more brightening than having the diploma of CET-6 [A national English test in China] and even CET-8 [higher level English tests]."

I recall one student from my own English class who felt ashamed at first that he could not write but a few broken sentences. Then he got up early every day to read English on campus before class began. I saw him study English every morning on my way to the classroom. Students wrote glowingly about their pen pals, indicating they exchanged many e-mails with them and used English to discuss a wide range of topics.

"Everything went well from the beginning, especially between Christina and me," wrote Sherry. "I can't help talking about her. She is an optimistic and lovely young woman. In the e-mails, we talked each other's different culture origins, lifestyle and even the air-crashing between the two countries on April 1. As people in the world, Christina is a peace-lover. Both of us don't hope anything unpleasant will happen. I love my homeland, and so does she."

Another student, Shi, wrote of her experience: "I'm glad that I got an American pen pal, Ann. She is a reporter at a newspaper. She also has a happy family. I admire her lifestyle very much. She will travel with her husband when they have a holiday, paint her house when she wants and grow plants in her garden when she likes." The course also gave Shi an interest in reading other material available on the Internet. "When I have spare time, I read English newspapers and magazines," she writes. "The 21st Century [a Chinese English-language paper] and English Salon [a Chinese English-language magazine] are always my favorites. From them, I not only know something of the outside world, but also improved my reading skill. The fact that I didn't

have much difficulty in reading is due to this."

Seven of the 20 students also noted that reading about the Internet and exercises in using search engines and researching topics were helpful to them. "The course gives me a great help," writes Sheng. "Before attending it, I knew little about the Internet and rarely went to the Internet, but now that has changed a lot. I can do some simple operations freely." At least five of the students mentioned that their interest in the Internet provided strong motivation to take the course. "In the past, I showed very little interest in English, and I was often unwilling to learn it unless forced to do it," writes Zou Jian. "When I was told by Miss Zhao that we will have a Web course via the Internet, I thought maybe it could work for me, for I was very keen on the computer and network. Since it, I changed a lot. I get excited to learn English on the Internet." Another student, Shijun, wrote of a change that occurred in his interest in English because of the course. "In the past, English for me was like a vacuum where there was no warm sunshine, whereas I am a zealot on computer and network…the marriage of English study and the Internet gives me reasons not to relinquish my interest." Shijun received the first prize at the university in this year's English contest, having the highest score among 800 students who participated. He was quite encouraged by the Internet course and his English writing improved much. He is determined further study in America after school. Some other students told me they would continue English online, and not just for tests. At least four of the students wrote at length about the contrast of the Internet course with traditional Chinese study of English. "This course has a lighter, newer and more relaxing circumstance when compared with traditional course. Its very form is novel, so it can stimulate our study greatly," wrote Liu Xiao. "This course is an interactive process; the teacher does not just pour knowledge into students' brains in a classroom. In this course, students have more freedom to learn and discuss with teachers or other students."

In terms of areas needing improvement, a few students mentioned the slow speed of Internet access in China, and also the high cost that resulted from having to be online to do several aspects of the course. Two students mentioned that their efforts were hampered by poor equipment, which they attributed in part to the lack of support by the university. The equipment has been rapidly updated in universities, which should not pose the sort of problems that students now experience. Two students suggested that reading assignments were inconsistent or inappropriate. One student mentioned that the articles used for assignments were generally too long and too boring. Another student said she thought some assignments were too easy, while others were too difficult for the class. This points out one shortcoming of the Internet class, in that the teacher is not physically present in the classroom and cannot easily assess how students are handling assignments posted in advance on a Web site. This underscores the importance of communication with students, particularly early in the course, to see if assignments are challenging students, but not above their frustration level.

7. Lessons learned

In addition to some of the refinements mentioned above, we learned a variety of things from this project that would benefit future Internet courses or Internet integrated EFL classes in China and elsewhere:

Establish multiple points of contact between teacher and students. While students are enticed by the "high-tech" of an Internet approach and curriculum can be carefully designed, they also need the "high touch" of feeling a relationship with the teacher. A traditional English teacher builds his/her contact with students simply by standing in front of a classroom and trying to educate them; it is infinitely harder in a virtual classroom, but no less important. While students may feel intrinsically motivated to study English at an Internet venue, they also need a constant flow of communication with the teacher, whether in individual notes or in group communication. This has a significant implication for classroom Internet integration.

Accommodate technological limitations when designing an Internet course. It is easy to be spoiled by the ubiquitous and relatively fast access to the Internet that teachers may have in their private access. A course designer cannot assume that all students will be so lucky. Referring students to graphically intensive Web sites or sites that involve interactivity may be ill-advised, or at least should be done judiciously.

Anticipate varying levels of Internet expertise among participants. While most of the participating students had some exposure to the Internet, they had not used it for the purposes of taking a course. There also was wide disparity among students in computer expertise. At one point in the course, for example, I asked students to copy text from a Web page and paste it into a word processing program. I realized that I could not take for granted that all students knew how to do this and I had to explain the operation. It's not wise to assume that students have had experience working with multiple windows, search engine techniques, etc., things that Western Internet users have been able to learn through time and trial-and-error.

Find "student champions" who will help you on-site. We were lucky to have one student, Tom, who was especially intrigued by the course. At one point, before the course started, he e-mailed us to introduce himself. When we wrote back and told him to collect names of interested students, he wrote back with the names and e-mail addresses of 20 students. At other times, Tom was invaluable in helping with logistics or telling what students were doing on the course.

Expect to run into the mystery of non-participation. Some aspects of the course that we had assumed would be popular and useful were not used widely by the students. For example, the lack of sufficiently fast Internet access doomed student participation in the Web site's chat room. But we were surprised that students didn't make more use of the message board on the site, despite sending what I thought were specific directions for doing so, and Tom's urgings. What was the reason -- technological limitations? Slow Internet speeds? Not wanting to leave poorly written notes for other students to view? Lack of interest? We could never determine why student participation was poor in this or other aspects of the course.

The use of testing as part of a program. As an optional course, this Internet project didn't contain ways to directly measure and assess how students were grasping the grammar and other parts of the class. Some of the student writing that was supposed to be sent to me late in the course never arrived (due in part perhaps to e-mail difficulties). Still, it seems to be important that students be required to send some evidence that they are participating in the course -- preferably from the first week and continuing every week -- and that assessment of learning and skill progress be ongoing and regular.

Should the course be a stand-alone course or an add-on? Part of the struggle for this course was that it was not sanctioned by the Chinese university for Internet access and was an optional activity for students. Thus, when students had other priorities that directly affected grades or their futures, like the CET-4 (College English test, Band 4), they were more likely to ignore the Internet course. Having the course guaranteed with reliable Internet access would have helped in a variety of ways, but also would have added additional responsibility and time commitment for us. The improved technologies and increased experience now should have better premises for computer enhanced courses in China.

8. Conclusion

Chinese students who are serious about learning English for the purpose of real communication appear ready to try something new -- many in this course were aware of the shortcomings of the traditional way of teaching English in China. An Internet-based course, is by definition a real, communicative use of English for these students. The incorporation of a pen pal component in the course increases intrinsic motivation to learn English.

Obviously, finding enough pen pals to match the number of students is a huge challenge, but one that might be readily met by seeking participation from freshmen composition classes that almost all American college students must take. Many other Internet capabilities, such as audio, video and voice chat, are currently available and could make an English classroom truly virtual and available anywhere in the world. First, technical limitations must be overcome. Then, teachers and school administrators must experiment to find appropriate and useful ways that to motivate students to learn English through novel applications of the Internet (Zhao, 2003). For now, realistic and practical Internet-based English reading and writing courses seem like a logical place to do this. The students and the technologies are ready -- the question is, how ready are all other participants in the education process?

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