

# The Internet and Foreign Language Instruction: Practice and Discussion

David A. Trokeloshvili and Neal H. Jost

[trevil \[at\] gol.com](mailto:trevil[at]gol.com)

Department of Literature, Tokai University, Hiratsuka, Japan

## Abstract

While the use of the Internet in EFL is gaining popularity in universities across Japan, there has been no one unified method of instruction which has gained a wide following. Foreign language instructors, most often, experiment in various approaches and methods, seeking to integrate the new technology into their present curriculum. This is natural as the introduction of the technology is new to the EFL classroom, and requires constant investigation and experimentation. The aim of this paper is to put forth a method of instruction which has yielded favorable results in improved language production especially in written English, giving consideration to student needs and teacher goals. The paper will detail how a one-year composition course utilized the computer facilities at a major university in Japan. The course set out to familiarize students with basic typing skills and general computer usage, and went on to help them understand the Internet with the ultimate goal of using it to create well-designed, well-written and interesting home pages.

Students were involved in tasks and projects that required them to participate in newsgroup discussions via an intranet system, to learn how to use the Internet for general research purposes, to create home page maps, and to create text and materials for personal home pages. The course called on students to use written English in every aspect of the creation of their home pages. The balance between writing instruction and computer instruction was met with promising results in students gaining competence in both areas of instruction.

## Brief Chronology

The introduction of the Internet into the EFL classroom in Japan has brought about many changes in the way instructors approach foreign language teaching. Perhaps the most significant changes have occurred in writing instruction. In the early 90s, many writing instructors moved their classes out of the traditional classroom into the computer room. Instruction was based on computer skills and writing production, both receiving equal emphasis.

Then e-mail was in the forefront with instructors setting up key pal connections; emphasis was, thus, placed on authentic communication and the speed of production for written text. The next area of interest was Intranet systems. Intranet systems provided students with an opportunity to have written discussions with their fellow classmates, to write on various topics, to state their opinions within a familiar framework, peers writing to peers for the purpose of sharing and exchanging thoughts and ideas. In general, the instructor served as a facilitator, monitor, and commentator--providing students with relevant writing topics, making sure there is equal participation, and being a higher authority on the issues discussed.

Presently, the production of home pages has gained immense popularity in foreign language writing instruction. It allows for the integration of the many different facets of computer technology--basic word processing: e-mail and key pals, Internet searches, and Intranet communication projects--into the writing processes. And most importantly it provides an opportunity for students to enjoy writing in English with the role of the instructor being not only a facilitator and writing instructor, but also a web technician.

## Needs and Goals

Essential to any web-based course is thoughtful consideration of student needs and teacher goals. While the two often exist hierarchically, with student needs given less consideration, a web-based course allows for more equality in teacher expectations and student needs as student enthusiasm is naturally promoted by the technology and the excitement of creating a personal home page.

The following chart illustrates student needs and teachers goals, and presents a model of what teachers might consider in planning a web-based course:

## **Student Needs**

- Need for writing practice.
- Need for writing with a real purpose in mind.
- Need for authentic audience.
- Need for reward or fruit of labor.
- Need for feedback.
- Need for motivation.
- Need for new challenge
- Need for peer evaluation
- Need for something new.
- Need for new skills.
- Need for skills for future employment.
- Need for creativity.
- Need authenticity in writing.

## **Teacher Goals**

- Improved writing in all areas.
- Higher awareness/consciousness.
- Writing with a purpose.
- General understanding of the technology.
- Active communication.
- Student enthusiasm.
- Understanding of the Internet.
- Students working cooperatively.
- General understanding of web research.
- General computer/typing skills etc.
- Comprehensive understanding...computers
- Work outside usual instruction paradigm.
- Self-Expression in student work.

Such a model is based on the notion that students do in fact, whether consciously or otherwise, bring to class a set of personal needs, and that teachers often have a goal oriented agenda for the students. It suggests that the relationship between the two factors need not be mutually exclusive, and that greater flexibility can be allowed in a web-based course. A web-based writing course creates a natural atmosphere in which students realize the experience of producing authentic and creative texts for a real audience, something new for most of them.

The following describes a general approach to computer and writing instruction. It has been met with favorable results in that students are eager to create their own home pages, are eager to produce written text for an authentic audience, and are eager to display their own individual talents which might not otherwise be recognized in a traditional classroom. The description will be made chronologically following a one-year syllabus. The contact hours were one and half hours per week over two 15 week semesters. There were 30 second year students in the class. Each student had access to an individual computer during class and unlimited access to a computer room outside of class.

## **Introduction to Computers**

Perhaps the most important aspect of a web-based class is computer competence. Most our students have had little or no experience with computers; in fact, some to a limited degree fear high technology, which is an area in need of consideration. So initially students learn how to turn on a computer, and then work towards an understanding of opening and closing programs. That will provide a basis for further understanding of the operating system (OS), Windows 95. Once a basic understanding of the OS has been attained,

students will work with simple word processing programs.

Students will write simple profile files which will later be included in their home pages. Germane to the understanding of computers and file creation is task repetition; that is to say, students receive a demonstration of certain usage techniques and then those techniques are repeated frequently. Task repetition allows all students to master the required computer functions for the class. Task repetition is also emphasized in gaining typing skills.

## Typing Skills

It cannot be taken for granted that students who can actually produce written documents have typing skills. Learning basic keyboard letter assignments can be acquired without having any knowledge of typing. And without typing instruction many students do indeed follow such a course. At the onset of the program each student is given a typing program for an English keyboard with a Japanese interface, all menus coming up in Japanese. Students are required to keep a log of their typing practice. (They are also required to work outside of class.) It is hoped that all students will be able to type with reasonable competence. Typing at an advanced level is not a requirement for the course, yet a few students do go on to become rather proficient at typing, a skill they carry with them to the market place. In short, typing instruction is to provide students with a basic understanding of the keyboard layout and help them in their production of written text. It is emphasized at the beginning of the program.

## Intranet and Newsgroups

The first area in which the students actually put their typing skills to use is within the intra-university newsgroup created specifically for the class. The computer center at our university can provide teachers with intra-university newsgroups. Such newsgroups are accessible only by those who can log onto the university system itself. As the system is rather easy to understand, only minimal instruction is required. What is more specifically required is a list of posting topics. It is a list of topics which students are required to post messages on. The list is student and teacher generated, giving a balance between the two. Topics are related to student life, family history, sports, music, food, pets, culture and views of the world, to illustrate a few. The requirements for posting essays/messages in the newsgroup are as follows:

- Each student must post a message for each assignment.
- Each student must post the message before the deadline.
- Each student is asked to comment on other messages posted.
- Each posting must have a name.
- Each posting must be complete.
- Posting must be made on a weekly basis.

The aim of the newsgroup is twofold: on the one hand, it is designed to help students develop fluency in writing, gain confidence in writing for a semi-public audience, and, most importantly, to help students in learning how to express themselves in written form; on the technical side, it is designed to help students develop and gain technical competence through repetition in typing, in opening and closing programs, in using e-mail for posting messages, and in receiving messages from the teacher. It might also be mentioned that the newsgroup provides a sense of community for the students as they are no longer communicating only with the teacher, but with each other. In short, the newsgroup is the communication center of the class, where messages are left, where stories are written, where questions are asked,...where language occurs.

## HTML and Index Files

HTML stands for hyper text markup language. It is the international markup language used in the creation of web pages, and serves as the foundation for the index file, the primary file of a home page and other associated pages.

While HTML is easy to follow, it is indeed cumbersome to write each time a new file or internal link is created. So for our classes a template has been set up for students to copy. This provides students with a basic home page which they can modify as they like. Through simple modification of the index file the color of the home page can be changed, pictures can be inserted, font size can be changed, tables can be created and the like. Here simple illustrations and a few handouts will provide students with the knowledge they will need to experiment in their own way making their pages come to life. This is the preliminary stage in making a home page.

# **Introduction to the World Wide Web**

There are several basic areas that need to be discussed in relation to the World Wide Web and its classroom applications.

The first area is helping students understand the basic commands for operating the web browser, the software that accesses the web. The software is limited to two or three major competitors and all have compatible features. A simple demonstration will provide students with enough knowledge to understand general navigational techniques.

The next area is obviously more important, and that of course is of what to use the web for. Some have termed the web as the ultimate resource location with infinite searching capabilities. While that may be true in part, the question of what is most beneficial for the classroom objectives must be asked. The objectives for our classes focus primarily on composition and home page production. So searching, or net surfing, is somewhat limited in scope. A distinction between internal and external searching needs to be made. An external search for classroom application, or sometimes referred to as a treasure hunt, is where a teacher guides the students on a web hunt for a particular piece of information. The rationale is that students will gain Internet competence through practical experience under the careful watch of the instructor. An internal search is concerned with information located on the instructor's home page.

The distinction being that an internal search will be limited in scope and will provide students with an obtainable example of what can be put on a home page. Finally, it can be noted that web searching has a two fold purpose: on the one hand, students are looking for information; and, on the other, they are finding home page examples which they may try to replicate. In short, web searching should be the sole activity of a web-based course; rather the inspiration for student development.

## **The Instructor's Home Page**

The instructor's home page is multifunctional. Its primary function is to serve as an example for students to follow in designing their own home pages. It should be clear and easy to follow. One would also expect it to have external links to other home pages-- universities; EFL sights; on-line materials; other students' home pages; reference books et al. Internally, it would have explanations on HTML, examples of generic home pages, access links to student home pages, and an example of a home page map, to mention a few.

Related to classroom management, it would have course schedules, posting on course requirements, student/teacher evaluation forms, ...everything which would normally be distributed in handout form. It is essential for teachers to also post personal essays, stories or poems as assigned to students, adding a dimension of personal involvement to the class. The instructor's home page is the bulletin board of the classroom.

## **Students' Home Pages**

Like the instructor's home page, student home pages should have a certain amount of appeal. Each student should have his own home page with internal and external links. It should have all the assignments posted; should have color and personal photos; should have projects clearly listed and linked; and should have all the essays which are required for the Intranet writing list. But these things come rather naturally to students as they feel they are presenting themselves to a wider audience and want to make a good impression.

## **Home Page Web Projects**

Web projects are gaining immense popularity in EFL writing instruction. In our course, students are assigned two projects for the course.

The first project is a group project. It entails students in working together to create a small business in which they must produce a commercial home page with store descriptions, business hours, product/service description and all the things you would expect to find in a real commercial home page. Recent home pages have included such interesting ideas as second language spelling services, restaurants, travel agencies with regional descriptions, hotels, airlines, term paper writing services, used car sales and so on. What is required of each group project are not just visual items, but written text providing descriptions and general things related to their business, perhaps an exaggeration of what would be expected in a real commercial home page.

The second project is more academic related. Students are asked to investigate some topic of interest on the Internet and include their findings on an internal link on their home page. Topics range from cultural comparisons to biological interests. The topics are open and the students are to follow the guidelines set forth by the instructor. The number of possible home page projects is as great as one can imagine and are met with enthusiasm by the students.

## Evaluation

Evaluation for a web-based course is subjective in nature. While no one clear theory or position on web-based course evaluation exists, it is clear that there are several main factors in need of consideration. As a web-based course does not follow a traditional writing course paradigm, more consideration needs to be given to the students production of none text related material, the index file, the home page map, photograph and general appearance of their text. As a web based-writing instruction is communicative in a much broader sense, attention also needs to be given to frequency of posting on the Intranet; that is to say, students should also receive merit for their work quantitatively. Peer evaluation can also plays an important role in evaluation.

## Conclusion

The above discussion seeks to illustrate some practical applications of the Internet in foreign language writing instruction. Foreign language writing instruction in recent years has seen many changes, and with the Internet gaining in popularity it is natural for instructors to incorporate the technology into their instructional paradigm. In doing so, many pedagogical and technical issues must be given consideration. The direction we have chosen is to use the technology ultimately as a motivational tool.

The idea of public displaying of student text has never enjoyed a true following; students simply object to their work being show to other students despite all the inherent benefits. In this regard, the creation of student home pages breaks through that barrier, and students feel comfortable about writing for a public audience. Another area in which the Internet motivates students is that of creativity and the 'packaging' of their work. A poem or short story with a picture has more appeal than just written text. Students become keenly aware of this and try complement writing with a picture or background color. The web class is also communal in sense: the reading audience has widened; the audience has become authentic; peer response is becoming more common and easier; compositions also have a greater attraction with their aesthetic appeal and students search to produce attractive work. The advantages of conducting a composition on an Internet environment are numerous, and the future holds many bright innovations in instructional approaches and research projects.

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