

Using Online Grammar Quizzes for Language Learning

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This article is based on using online grammar quizzes as a tool in teaching grammar to a class of 30 low proficiency ESL learners in the first semester of their Diploma in Mechanical Engineering course. Despite the low entry qualifications in English, these students completed the Preparatory English Program and 29 out of the 30 students passed.

Introduction

Multimedia computers and the worldwide web have made computers a source of entertainment, information, communication and education. Computers are versatile. They can emulate a book, an audio CD player, a video game, a telephone, an editing studio or even a drafting table. The combined use of computers and online grammar quizzes sourced from the Web can be used as an alternative to printed classroom materials to provide language practice to English as Second Language (ESL) learners.

Printed classroom materials come in one format whereby one type either works or does not work for a group of students. However, online quizzes can be selected and organized to meet the needs of students whose fluency levels vary based on their exposure to and experience in the language. At the same time, while working on these activities the students also get timely and appropriate feedback.

Advantages of Using Online Quizzes

Based on a study carried out by Dataramani et al. (1999) at the City University of Hong Kong to ascertain the needs of the learners and to investigate their attitudes and motivation towards the self-access mode of learning, the use of computers appears to be one of the most ideal medium through which students can be encouraged to carry out practice activities.

There are many advantages in using the computer as a tool in promoting language learning. It is a one-to-one mode of teaching and allows for active interaction between the student and the computer. It allows for the student to progress at his own pace without worrying about negative or impatient reactions. At the same time, it is non-threatening.

As for online quizzes, there are a wide range of activities available for free at various web sites. One easily accessible and user-friendly web site is The Internet TESL Journal's Self-Study Quizzes for ESL students at <http://a4esl.org>.

The quizzes are developed by ESL/EFL teachers from all over the world. Besides being designed to provide students with a self-access mode of learning, these are also available for teachers to be used as materials to complement their classes. All the quizzes are organized in such a way that enables teachers to select them according to categories (grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, spelling, etc.), levels of difficulty (easy, medium and difficult) and browser requirements (HTML-only, JavaScript or Flash). In addition, there is variation in the presentation of the quizzes such as fill in the blanks, multiple choice, cloze, true or false and multiple choice with radio button, just to name a few.

One of the advantages of using online quizzes from The Internet TESL Journal's Self-Study Quizzes for ESL students is the availability of a large number of online grammar quizzes which have small file sizes using only HTML code. These are tagged in such a way as to allow users to select either according to grammatical terminology (articles, conjunctions, verbs etc.) or subject matter (John's Life, Astronomy, An Invitation etc.).

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To keep a record of the students' attempts at completing the online grammar quizzes, the teacher can prepare a form on which he/she can include the titles of the files, the dates on which each has been completed and the students' scores. In this way, to a limited extent, using such quizzes via computers to provide students language practice work reflects self-access language learning. Self-access language learning is learning a language using materials in a self-instructed way in order to facilitate learning in a self-contained learning environment. The materials used are readily accessible, complete with available help through answer keys or through counseling by the facilitator. Hence, the students are in an environment in which they take on the role of active participants rather than passive recipients of information (Dickinson, 1987).

Some of the characteristics of self-instructional materials as outlined by Lockwood (1998) appear to suit the use of online grammar quizzes made available off line to students through computers. Firstly, it allows for self-paced learning, private learning, active learning and individualized tutoring. Secondly, such materials can be made available at any time to any number of learners. Moreover, the activities are standardized, up-datable and can be organized in such a way as to allow for structured teaching. Most importantly, learners get continuous feedback, which allows them to monitor their own progress.

Description of Classroom Procedure

During the June to October 2003 semester, a group of 30 first semester diploma level-students from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering undergoing the Preparatory English (BEL 100) program was given the opportunity to solely practice their grammar using online grammar quizzes sourced from The Internet TESL Journal's Self-Study Quizzes for ESL students. All the students had obtained D7 and D8 in English in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examinations (equivalent to 'O' levels). These are the lowest pass grades awarded to candidates.

The Preparatory English Program (BEL 100) is a compulsory course for all first-semester diploma level students in MARA University of Technology. The students enter the diploma-level programs based on their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination results. The Preparatory English Program carries 3 credit hours while the students have 6 contact hours per week for the duration of 14 weeks (one semester). The students' achievement is based on an on-going assessment (progress test) and the final examination. This program consists of four components - grammar, reading, writing and speaking. The allocation of marks for the grammar components is the highest at 45 marks, while the reading component is given 30, the writing component 15 and the speaking component 10.

As part of the grammar component, students carry out remedial work to improve their mastery of some basic grammar rules in the following areas:

- **Parts of Speech**--nouns, pronouns, verbs, modals, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, determiners, articles
- **Tenses**--simple tenses and present and past continuous tenses (all using the active voice)

As part of the teaching and learning of grammar, the students used reference materials in the form of handouts which had been taken from two sources - Gaudart, Hughes and Michael's *Towards Better English Grammar* and Azar's *Understanding and using English Grammar*. All the handouts included teaching points/explanations, controlled practice exercises and answer keys. The students were taught how to use the materials as independent learners. They were given a choice in the approach they could use when working on the selected materials. One approach was they could attempt the practice exercises, check the answers against the answer key and then read the relevant teaching points for which their answers were wrong. The other alternative was for them to read the teaching points, attempt the practice exercises and then check the answers against the answer key. If any student required further help, he then asked the lecturer for clarification. The lecturer would then explain to the student individually.

To reinforce the teaching of grammar, the students spent about two to three hours per week in the computer laboratory. This lab did not have Internet access. As such, prior to the commencement classes, online grammar quizzes were selected from The Internet TESL Journal's Self-study Quizzes for ESL Students based on the list of items to be taught within the grammar component of the Preparatory English Program syllabus. The selected quizzes were then downloaded, saved on to the hard disc of the computer and organized into folders.

The folders were then copied onto a floppy disc which was then handed to the laboratory technician who copied the folders into each of the computer terminals in the Multimedia Laboratory II at the Academy of Language Studies in the university.

Feedback from the Students

At the end of the semester, a survey was carried out to ascertain the students' response to the use of these online grammar quizzes. A questionnaire containing 16 questions was used. Each questionnaire was completed on a one-to-one basis by way of interviews so as to ensure that the students understood the questions.

The students were all computer literate and had had experience surfing the Internet, playing computer games and doing assignments either at home or at cyber cafes prior to enrolling for the Diploma in Mechanical Engineering course in MARA University of Technology. They either learned to use the computer on their own or from friends. Currently, besides using computers to do online grammar quizzes, they are also using computers to mainly do assignments in labs made available in the university. Some use their friends' computers while others do so at cyber cafes.

With regards to the use of computers to do online grammar quizzes, almost all the students claimed that they enjoyed it. If given a choice of doing the same quizzes using printed handouts in class or doing them via computers, almost all the respondents chose the latter. At the same time, all of them were of the opinion that they had indeed increased their general knowledge by working on online grammar quizzes.

Most of the students found the online grammar quizzes more interesting and less difficult than the exercises and activities they worked on in the handouts and past-year examination papers. The main challenge faced while working on online grammar quizzes appeared to be the fact that some of the words and expressions were new to the students. However, they overcame this challenge by referring to dictionaries. When it came to difficulties faced in answering the questions, more tended to ask friends while some preferred to refer to notes or click on the answer button to find out the answer.

Conclusions

The students were computer literate and were very much at ease when using computers. These students were also resourceful in the sense they had mastered the use of the computer on their own or through help from friends. They had used the computer not only as a tool to access information, but also to some extent as a tool to facilitate learning.

It was also heartening to note that the students enjoyed using computers to carry out English language practice activities and this enthusiasm appeared to be intrinsic. Besides this, they also increased their general knowledge through exposure to a variety of content as these activities, downloaded from the web sites have been contributed by language teachers from around the world. Therefore, the students when doing the activities were subconsciously developing their schemata.

The students appeared to show an inclination to want to work with friends as part of their preferred learning approach and the strategies used to overcome challenges. They also gave the impression that they wanted to work with the teacher therefore indicating that they were still teacher-dependent. This is not at all surprising as it is very much a part of the Malaysian culture to seek out the teacher for guidance. They were quite new to the experience of not being teacher-directed in a classroom setting. However, the fact that some of the students preferred to work alone showed that they can be trained to be autonomous learners.

It was quite understandable that many students found the Internet-sourced activities more interesting than those they had been exposed to in textbooks and in past year examination papers. This is because when writing for teaching or testing purposes, there is a tendency to use straightforward sentence structure and familiar content. Thus, using activities that are more challenging from sources outside the country helps to expose students to a variety of sentence construction and content and at the same time gives them opportunity to use various strategies, that is, dictionaries, reference books and peer/teacher conferencing to bring about learning.

Recommendations

Judging from the responses of the students, it is strongly recommended that lecturers teaching in an institution of higher learning like MARA University of Technology where computer laboratories are made available for use as part of teaching English should exploit the intrinsic enthusiasm that the students have towards using computers. They should incorporate computers as one of the medium of language practice. At the same time, more qualitative and quantitative studies should be carried out to ascertain the effectiveness of using online grammar quizzes to improve the ESL students' overall language proficiency as well as their motivation to want to learn English.

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