Energizing the ESL/EFL Classroom through Internet Activities

Kuang-wu Lee
Johnny [at] hcu.edu.tw
Hsuan Chuang University (Hsin-chu, Taiwan)

Introduction

Keeping students interested and engaged in the current topic or activity is a daily challenge for teachers in the ESL/EFL classroom. One of the advantages of the Internet is that it provides new possibilities for assisting teachers to successfully meet this challenge. Though Internet-based activities can potentially energize the ESL/EFL classroom, this potential may not always be achieved. If the teacher does not clearly set the goals and strategies of the activities, students may lose interest, learn little, or both.

In this article I will discuss several kinds of Internet-based activities for the ESL/EFL classroom and describe some strategies to help ensure that the activities will keep the students' interest. I will begin by giving a brief summary of four basic ways in which the Internet can be used in the ESL/EFL classroom.

Four Basic Functions

Grey (1999) has identified four ways in which the Internet can function as an educational tool in schools. These can also be considered four basic ways the Internet can be used in ESL/EFL classrooms.

(1) **Search for and receive**
  This category comprises activities that are based on using the Internet as a huge virtual library. In these activities students search for and retrieve information from this library.

(2) **Publish and provide**
  These activities involve not the retrieval, but the publication of information.
  This publishing is done on web pages, which are the basic places where information is stored on the Internet.

(3) **Talk to and reply**
  These are conversational activities that take place via the Internet through email correspondence and in ÒchatÓ rooms. Strictly speaking, this category could also include Internet phone conversations.

(4) **Collaborate and learn**
  This category includes joint projects that involve students in two or more classrooms that might be thousands of miles apart.

The fourth way of using the Internet usually involves one or more of the other three ways. Collaboration between classrooms almost always involves the use of email. Also, it may include the joint publication of web pages or joint search activities. In what follows I will discuss only the first three functions listed above, as these are the basic ways the Internet can be used to provide activities for ESL/EFL classrooms.

Internet Conversations - An Inherently Social Function

Of the three basic functions, probably the one most often written about in relation to teaching ESL/EFL is the third - Talk to and reply. For example, see Nagel (1999) and Liao (1999). It is clear that email conversations on the Internet provide a useful learning tool for the ESL/EFL classroom. This is because even though such conversations may take place across thousands of miles, and between people who have never met except on the Internet, they are social activities, and social activities tend to engage students'

interests.

According to Garner and Gillingham (1996), Internet conversations can be intensely social activities. This will sometimes be the case, for example, if an email correspondence evolves so that the people writing to each other become close friends. Probably most email conversations, however, are casual. But even casual conversations are occasions for which the ESL/EFL student must try to make himself or herself understood to another actual person (other than teacher or classmates). This makes the act of communicating in English not just a theoretical problem, but a practical one. The requirement to solve that practical problem can be a strong motivator for students to try hard to construct clear, grammatical messages that communicate their thoughts.

However, even though Internet conversations have the potential to capture the interest of students, there are factors that can block this potential. For one thing, some ESL/EFL students are not advanced enough to be able to engage in such conversations. Even if most students in a class can correspond at some level in English, there may be one or more who are lagging behind and who would not benefit from trying to use email. The teacher must be sensitive to those students who may not yet be ready for email. Such students may need special preparation or may need to be furnished with alternative exercises. Requiring them to do what they are not ready to do will lead them to have little interest in the activity.

Another factor that can lessen the energizing and pedagogical value of Internet conversations is student anxiety about making errors. Some students may be capable of conversing in English via email but may also be afraid of making mistakes that others will see. Such fear can reduce the student's enthusiasm for the activity and in fact may lead him or her to attempt to avoid doing it. Care must be taken to try to reduce student anxiety about making mistakes. One way to do this is to offer to look over and correct the student's email messages before they are sent. In fact, going over a student's message with him or her can be an excellent learning opportunity for the student.

A third factor that can decrease student interest in Internet conversations is erratic replies. Sending email may be easy for the student, but to find a correspondent who will reply consistently may be hard. The teacher should assist students to find dependable, interested email partners. For K-12 classes, http://epals.com provides teachers information on classrooms around the world that are interested in email correspondence and collaborative projects.

Searching the Internet - A Wealth of Activities

Activities in the ESL/EFL classroom that are based on searching the Internet for information are not as inherently social as those that involve conversation. However, if the activities are well planned, they can generate enthusiasm among students and provide excellent learning opportunities. One kind of Internet activity that falls within the search category is the ÒscavengerÓ or ÒtreasureÓ hunt, in which students are given the task of searching the Internet for some kind of information presented in English (see Brown, 1999). Many other activities also involve searching for information on the Internet.

In a simple task that I call ÒFinding Favorites,Ó each student first chooses a topic of special interest. This might be a place, person, animal, event, hobby, sport, or movie - whatever subject the student finds appealing. Then the student searches the Internet for three web sites that are related to that interest. The student finds the web site, reads the material, and downloads one or two pages from the site to a ÒFavoritesÓ folder. The student then makes two short reports, either written or made orally to the class. The first report is an evaluation of the web sites, telling which were the most useful. The second is a summary of the main information that was found. The activity can be done in small groups of two or three if the members of the group are interested in the same subject.

This is an activity that requires the student to practice several skills, including English reading comprehension, comparing information, and summarizing and reporting in English. It is also an activity that is designed to naturally engage the student's interest. It does this because the student's Internet search is directed toward a topic that the student is already interested in.

It is possible, however, for students to get frustrated and lose interest in the activity if they have to spend too much time searching for web sites. Searching also decreases the time available for the linguistic tasks. It is therefore important that students be well-instructed in the use of search engines before beginning the activity. Also, it is a good idea for students to provide their topics of interest to the teacher a few days before the activity begins and for the teacher to prepare for the activity by searching for and recording the addresses of relevant sites for each interest. These addresses can then be provided to the students at the beginning of the activity. Alternatively, they can be held in reserve and given to students who have trouble finding sites themselves.

The recommendation to instruct students in the use of search engines before undertaking the activity is part of a more general point about designing Internet-based activities. This point is that students should be taught the Internet concepts and skills needed to carry out the activity, and then, before the activity begins, the teacher should briefly observe each student to make sure that he or she is proficient in the needed skills. The teacher should be watchful for students, especially those with little computer experience, who find it more difficult than others to understand and use the Internet. These students will require additional instruction and practice.

Web Pages - Creating and Publishing in English

One of the most potentially valuable and energizing Internet activities for students in the ESL/EFL classroom is to create their own web pages in English and publish them on a class website. There are many ways to go about such a project. The teacher may decide on the theme and the overall design of the site, or this may be a project for the entire class. Individual pages on the site may be assigned either to individuals or to small groups of students.

Some examples of kinds of web pages that students might compose for a class website are brief autobiographies, day-in-the-life pages that tell of students' daily activities, and short stories. It is very important that student addresses and phone numbers not be included in these. Another possibility is for the website to have as its theme the class's home city or country. In this case, different individuals or small groups might be given the task of preparing pages of various kinds of information, such as geographic, economic, cultural, and so on.

One of the most exciting characteristics of a web publishing project is the students' knowledge that the pages they compose will be on the Internet for the whole world to see. Knowing this can lead them to try hard to do their best work. Of course, the knowledge may also cause anxiety for some students because - as with email - they may fear making mistakes that can be seen by others. To reduce any anxiety, the teacher can go over students' work with them before it is published on the Internet.

In such projects there is always the question of how much responsibility students should be given for creating the appearance of the web pages. One possibility is to teach the students basic HTML, including the coding to insert images on a web page, and to allow them to design their pages. Another possibility is for the students to write only the text and for the teacher to code the text. The advantage of the first way is that by allowing students to code their pages they will ÒownÓ their pages more fully and take the project all the more seriously. However, too much time spent in learning HTML and on page design can reduce the value of the activity. If students are given the opportunity to design their own pages, it is important to set limits that will ensure that their focus stays on practicing and developing their English writing skills.

Summary and Conclusion

Of four kinds of Internet-based activity, three are fundamental: conversation, retrieval of information, and publication. Activities in each of these categories can energize the ESL/EFL classroom by offering new, interesting ways for students to practice and sharpen their English skills. To help ensure that students' interest is retained and that they get maximum value from these opportunities, the following recommendations should be considered by the teacher:

- Make sure that students understand the basic concepts and have the hands-on practice that they need to perform Internet-based activities.
- Make sure that the assigned activity (e.g., use of email) is not linguistically too advanced for the student.
- For email correspondence, help students find partners with whom they can engage in a genuine conversation.
- To forestall anxiety, give students the opportunity to have their email or web pages checked and corrected before they are sent or published. Make this a learning opportunity for students.
- When the activity is to create and publish web pages, be sure to keep the main focus on the language task, not on page design.

References

- Brown, I. (1999). Internet Treasure Hunts - A Treasure of an Activity for Students Learning English. http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Brown-TreasureHunts.html.
- Garner, R. & Gillingham, M. G. (1996). Internet Communications in Six Classrooms: Conversations across Time, Space, and Culture. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Grey, D. (1999). The Internet in School. London and New York: Cassell.

- Liao, C-c. (1999). E-mailing to Improve EFL Learners' Reading and Writing Abilities: Taiwan Experience. http://iteslj.org/Articles/Liao-Emailing.html.
- Nagel, P. S. (1999). E-mail in the Virtual ESL/EFL Classroom. The Internet TESL Journal. http://iteslj.org/Articles/Nagel-Email.html.

---

http://iteslj.org/Articles/Lee-InternetActivities.html