Exploring the Effectiveness of World Wide Web to Improve Communication Skills of Management Students: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This pilot study investigates the potential role of Internet resources as a means to develop communication skills in an interactive way. It also focuses on using real life situations for college students. Twenty MBA students in the first semester of their degree program were instructed to utilize the Web to complete four activities using www. The challenge of using the Internet in the foreign language teaching-learning process is to harness its potential to better serve the needs of the teachers and the learners. Data collected demonstrate that the Web is a suitable tool to increase language skills as well as a means to increase motivation. Pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Introduction

The Internet is making inroads in education but there is a wide discrepancy in India between the hype surrounding it and the way it is used in the teaching and learning process generally and in the foreign language teaching and learning process especially.

In India, even though computers with Internet access are becoming more and more available at every educational level, there are still only a few institutions which use electronic communication tools to provide education. And there are still fewer which implement them into the foreign language teaching and learning process in a systematic and consistent way. As Salmon (2000) said that millions of words have been written about the technology and its potential, but not much about what the teachers and learners can actually do online.

By using the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW), students can have almost instantaneous access to a range of foreign experiences in their target language. The computer then serves as a gateway to the virtual foreign world where "real people" are using real language in "real context."

Web-based teaching is understood as using existing websites as sources of course materials, and Internet technologies as tools supporting teacher-learner, learner-learner, and learner-content communication.

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So this pilot study sets out to assess the potential role of Internet resources as means for the improvement of the Communication Skills of the Management students of a college in Punjab.

Methodology
Materials

This study involved the piloting of four activities using the Internet. The types of activity are diverse, with varying foci on language forms, language functions, real life situations, etc. Each activity also varies in terms of purpose: planning a family trip to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, writing their own detailed profile on www.zunal.com/php, comparing any other Indian management college to the students' own college and virtual stock trading. Each of these activities requires students' search and access to websites related to their activity.

The following are the synopses of two of the four activities.

Activity One
Planning a family trip to Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Your family is planning a vacation to Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Since only you are well – versed with English language, you are in charge of finding as much information as possible about the Islands.

(1) Your family will need accommodation. Find names and fees for different kinds of hotels (e.g., luxury, moderate, hostels, etc.), then decide where you will stay. If you were travelling with friends, where would you stay?

(2) You will need to eat. However, your father wants traditional Punjabi food, your mother is vegetarian, you enjoy eating light food, and your younger brothers want fast food. Find restaurants to please everyone in your family.

(3) Your family will like to take some day trips around Port Blair. Find places, museums and beaches to visit.

(4) Your family wants to visit the tribal areas. Find the location and hours of operation. You probably want to visit when there is free admission. When is it?

Activity Two
 RISK AND REWARD - The Stock Exchange

I. Introduction

1. What is stock exchange? What are the basic rules of how the stock market functions?

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2. Are you interested in investing in the stock market? Do you check regularly stock exchange quotations?

3. Match the words to the definitions.

Bond	**bear market**	**share (US stock)**
Angel	**broker**	**Index**
Dividend	**bull market**	**closing price**
Portfolio	**ethical investment**	**shareholder (US stockholder)**

1. A situation on the stock market when people are buying shares in anticipation of the increase in the value and making profit by reselling it.
2. A collection of shares owned by a person or company.
3. A part of the profits of the company for a particular period of time paid to shareholders for every share they own.
4. A private investor who puts money into new business activities.
5. A person who buys and sells shares or goods for other people or companies.
6. A situation on the stock market when people are selling shares in anticipation of the decrease in the value and making a profit by buying again.
7. Any of the equal parts into which the capital stock of a company is divided
8. The price at the end of the day's trading on a commodity market or stock exchange

II. Internet work

1. Go to http://youtube.com/watch?v=H5OmlKqgrKU. Listen and fill the gaps.

Welcome back to NTD Asia Brief. In the market report:

Oil remained the big story on Friday, as Asia stocks dropped on Friday due to another .... in crude prices. Crude oil surged to a new peak above $124 a barrel as funds continued to pour into the market. The increase continues to affect Chinese oil refiner Sinopec, which fell around .... in both Hong Kong and Shanghai markets.

And finally, National Australia Bank, the nation's top ...., reported an 8 percent rise in first-half profit, sending its shares up.

2. Ask students what they remember about reading the share prices data to revise the vocabulary (last, change, high, low, volume, yield, P/E).

3. Divide the class into 4 groups. Assign each group a different stock exchange:

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Mumbai Stock Exchange – http://www.bseindia.com
New York Stock Exchange - http://www.nyse.com
Warsaw Stock Exchange - http://www.gpw.pl/
London Stock Exchange - http://www.londonstockexchange.com/en-gb/
Ask students to browse through the website and present to other groups what information can be found there.

lll. Homework

Go to http://simulator.investopedia.com to create an account and log in. Get your $100,000 in virtual cash here and start trading stocks. Read the rules, analyze companies that are listed there and start investing. After 2 weeks you will present results.

Context

Students undertook these four tasks independently as homework. Each activity was worth 50 points. Points were given for completed assignments, not for right/wrong answers. If and when learners encountered difficulty, they contacted the instructor via e-mail for assistance and clarification. Once students had completed the activities, the processes and outcomes of their work were discussed in their language lab. The language knowledge they had developed through the activities was also expanded upon through discussion.

Subjects

Subjects were twenty postgraduate management students enrolled in the first semester of their course. Except for one, all were computer literate with prior Internet experience.

Method of Assessment

A post-activity assessment questionnaire accompanied each activity. The questionnaire has two sections. The first section measured perceived language learning outcomes, reaction to the medium (site accessibility, ease of use, usefulness of information, and additional visits to site), and assessment of the task (ease of completion and length of time to complete task) in a 6 point Likert-type format. Attitudes towards the technology and the activity itself were measured by similar items on the questionnaire along with open-ended questions. A space for suggested improvements was also provided. Students completed an additional survey at the end of the term that queried their reactions to the activities as a whole.

Results and Discussion

Data reflecting subjects' perceived learning outcomes is presented in Figure 1. The number under each activity represents the percentage of subjects who agreed with the statement. The last

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column shows the mean of subjects in agreement for all activities. Eighty-one percent of the subjects reported increased knowledge of the language.

Figure 1. Perceived Learning Outcomes (n=20)

	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3	Activity 4	Mean
Language knowledge increased	62%	100%	77%	77%	81%

When asked about their attitude concerning the medium, 89% of the subjects indicated enjoyment using the Internet (Figure 2). In spite of some minor technical difficulties they encountered when completing the four tasks, 89% of subjects indicated that Web sites were always accessible, 81% reported that sites were easy to use, and 81% agreed on the usefulness of information to everyday life.42% of subjects returned to the site after completing the task.
Figure 2. Technology Outcomes (n=20)

	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3	Activity 4	Mean
Site was easy to access	100%	58%	46%	85%	89%
Site was easy to use	92%	48%	69%	77%	81%
Site information was useful	77%	62%	61%	77%	81%
Subject returned to site after task was completed	31%	46%	23%	38%	42%
Subject enjoyed using the web for this activity	85%	77%	85%	85%	89%

Figure 3 summarizes responses to the tasks subjects were assigned to undertake. Sixty-six percent of subjects indicated that instructions were easy to follow. Time on task was reported as two hour or less by 76%.

Figure 3. Responses to task technicalities (n=20)

	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3	Activity 4	Mean
Instructions were easy	69%	69%	62%	62%	66%
Activity took less than 2 hours	87%	84%	92%	72%	76%

The high mark for satisfaction with the medium (mean of 85%) obtained on each of the four task-related surveys increased to 100% in the final retrospective questionnaire.

This is an exciting result, especially for second language teachers in search of instructional activities that will increase time on task. There is a direct relation between satisfaction and level of interest. If, as subjects reported, using the Web makes the class more interesting, they will be willing to spend more time performing a task or browsing over other information connected to it.

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As one subject admits "... the site was fantastic and again I felt compelled to explore on my own ...."

Satisfaction with the medium clearly outweighed any dissatisfaction due to technical difficulties encountered in accessing and using the sites.

Another explanation may be found in the medium's intrinsic characteristics. Students described that the Web offers current, interesting, varied, and useful information that engages multiple modalities through combined text, sound, and visuals. It has been demonstrated that visuals can be employed to aid learning and foster positive attitudes and visual stimuli can also become memory-assisting devices (Stickels & Schwartz, 1987) as well as comprehension scaffolds (Meskill, 1996). Referring specifically to the stock trading activity, subjects commented on the opportunity to be creative as they were engaged in mentally stimulating exercise.

Moving into another aspect of motivation, it is encouraging to report that once having completed an assigned task, one third of the subjects returned to the sites on their own. Suffice it to say that even though motivation for learning beyond expectations is not a very common or easily measured outcome in an instructional setting, this modest outcome would appear to support integrating the Web in second language instruction.

Figure 4 presents data collected after subjects completed all four activities. One hundred percent of responses indicated that subjects enjoyed using the Internet in the course because it made for a more interesting class. When asked if they felt they had learned more English by doing the Web activities, the entire group (100%) agreed with the statement.

All subjects (100%) also recognized the Web as a valuable learning tool offering updated information in comparison to printed resources. Subjects' satisfaction with the medium was also assessed through other statements about the Internet.

Because many subjects stated that the Web was a necessary component of instruction (83%), it was easy to use (92%), and they felt comfortable using it (92%), a high number of the subjects (92%) reported that they would take another course that required use of the Internet. Interestingly, there was no direct correlation between getting a better grade because of the Web (67%) and learning English (92%).

Although the majority of the subjects (19 out of 20) had had previous Internet exposure, one half agreed that using the Web for this class had resulted in the acquisition of additional technical skills.

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Figure 4. Post-activity results

S.NO	ATTITUDE AND BELIEFS	%YES
1.	I liked using the Web for this course	100
2.	This course was more interesting because of Web use	100
3.	I would take another course that included use of the Web	92
4.	Web use is a necessary component of instruction	83
5.	I am comfortable using the Web to find information	92
6.	I will get a better grade in this course because I used the Web	67
	LANGUAGE LEARNING	
7.	I learned more English using the Web	92
	THE WEB AS A LEARNING TOOL	
8.	Overall, the World Wide Web is a valuable learning tool	100
9.	The web provided more current information than print resources	100
10.	I learned additional technical skills as a result of using the Web	50
11.	The browser program I used is an easy program to learn	92

CONCLUSION

This pilot study integrated language learning and technology to improve the communication skills of the students. Results affirm that the medium is a valuable tool for language learning. According to the pilot's participants, advantages of the Internet over other media and instructional tools are numerous. Data presented here also show very high satisfaction when using the Web for foreign language learning, to the point of outweighing technical challenges. So it can be concluded that the easily accessible and varied resources of the World Wide Web have enormous potential for supporting the language learning curriculum.

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