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**Teaching English Language Through the Internet –
Chatting, Search Engines and Weblogs**

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Teaching English Language through the Internet: Chatting, Search Engines and Weblogs

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Using the Internet to teach English language can increase student's motivation. Students may find the three activities in the Internet listed below easy as well as engrossing.

Chatting with Native Speakers of English

The Internet chat activities could be made more meaningful and interesting for the learners. The most motivating chat activity for language students is the possibility of interaction with the native speakers. Chatting with a native speaker helps students understand native English diction, sentences and intonation.

Students, however, may be prepared beforehand for this level of English exposure and the kinds of issues they would discuss and even avoid. Common chat room abbreviations such as **brb** (be right back), **gtg** (got to go), **ltns** (long time no see) etc., may be avoided, as these really do not help producing sentences. On the other hand, the communicated text may be kept as spontaneous and as authentic as possible. If a transcript could be produced and provided to the students later on, it would help students to identify the errors and avoid such errors in future communication.

Students should understand the objective of the session and the kind of follow up activities that can be undertaken when the session is over. Without specific objectives, the chat session may lose momentum. Simply letting students chat freely in a chat room could be compared with arriving in the classroom and telling students to talk among themselves. Students should be allowed plenty of time for preparation, as it will be the key to the success of the chat session. This is particularly true with lower level learners and those who are just introduced to chat room mode.

Preparation can include writing down some possible questions and discussion topics, learning more about the guest's country, or looking up some vocabulary in advance.

Students have a tendency to stick to simple structures and familiar vocabulary. This is not a bad thing, however it should not result in the sessions being filled with repetitive materials. Activities may be designed to give learners the opportunity to focus on a different vocabulary set each time and also to provide practice with different grammatical structures.

Some sample worksheets may be given to the students in advance. They will receive handouts about the person whom they are going to meet in the chat room, may be even a photo if possible of the person, the job he is doing and his likes and dislikes, and his

native country. For example if the native chatter is a Lecturer in the University of Alabama he can be quizzed about admission procedures, average age of students, male/female ratio in a class, class strength, exam pattern and schedules, nationality of teachers, working days and hours, uniforms, hostel facilities and accreditation procedures. Those details can be then compared to the students' native university.

If this is considered somewhat boring the student may chat with a couple in UK. Some information may be given about the couple like their names and age and their photographs. Lots of chatting can be done with the couple like traveling, moving house, going back to college, and manner of wedding whether love or arranged marriage, etc. This activity will be quite challenging as it forces the students to use past tense and some new vocabulary. In addition, by interviewing a couple, students are given practice with using "you" as a plural, "we" and "they". So overall a variety of language points can be targeted here.

We have given two examples above, which certainly sound strange to some extent. Treat these as falling in the extreme. We can always exploit the background of each individual student and his or her competence in the English language to provide him or her with the most appropriate contexts for chatting. We can also exploit such pedagogical principles as from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex, etc., in choosing and providing background information. In all these we have an eye on the types of structures and diction that the students as well as the guests will normally be expected to use.

Using Search Engines Effectively

Students need to learn to use English searching techniques because of several inter-related reasons. First, despite developing gradually as a multilingual channel, most of the World Wide Web is still in English. As a result, the best to empower students in terms of accessing resources online is to teach them searching skills in English.

Search engines are particularly useful tools, either when the user does not know on which website(s) the information he or she requires might be located, or when the user wants to find a particular website but does not know the location of it. A search engine is a search tool that collects information from the web by running an automatic program which visits huge numbers of website pages. It stores this information in a database and searches it by keyboard when it receives your search request. It then provides one with a list of sites that include your keyword(s).

In order to use search engine effectively the teacher has to make the students observe some basic principles. They are:

1. Students starting out with a specific topic from beginning sometimes meet with success, but sometimes are frustrated by a lack of resources on their topic. It might be best to have students brainstorm a variety of possibilities for the same topic.

2. Have the students practice their skimming and scanning skills by looking over the results for websites with biographical information. Also, it is good to teach students to look at links on the first page of a website rather than to start reading. Print out a copy of the first page of any website. Teach the students to look for the links at the top, sides, and bottom of the page first. Think of some topics contained in those links and ask students to circle the link they think is most likely to have information on the topic you suggest. If possible, tell students where to start their search. For keyword searches, robot or metasearch engines like Google, Altavista, and Yahoo search are great. For academic searches, try subject indexes like www.findarticles.com, google scholar, www.explicator.com.
3. You do not have to explain the mechanism by which search engine's software ranks websites in the result page. However, students should know that if they do not find a good link in the first 10-15 results, they should give up and try a different search. This helps to head off frustration as well as keeping students on track.
4. Especially when students are using commercial search engines, it is important to help them recognize the obvious signs of an unreliable source.

The following evaluation methods do not require a high language level.

Start with the website address itself. If the address ends in: .edu (it usually means it is related to educational or research material).

.gov (it usually means it is related to government resources).

.com (it means it is related to commercial products).

5. Do not let students to hang up on one site. Encourage them to find two or three sources right away. If one student finishes early, encourage him to walk around and help others rather than sit there and try to read the information right away.

These are some principles to make the student use search engines effectively as online resources are a great gift not only for their language learning, but also for their continuing education and life.

Using search engines is a general skill. A question arises as to how acquiring the skill to use search engines contributes to learning English. For one thing, students can, on their own, identify additional sources of reading materials from the Internet. They can access online dictionaries with the click of a mouse and choose the most appropriate word or words and phrases for the paragraph they are currently writing. They can check the spelling of words and appropriate form or forms of proverbs, idioms and phrases. Internet also offers so many exercises and pronunciation drills in English. They can use the spell check program. They can also use programs available to test the level of plagiarism in their own writing. If they do not remember a quote, particularly by an English poet, they can easily call for it with the help of search engines.

A search engine becomes an active partner in the learning process. In addition to reading, writing is also greatly facilitated in various ways: identification of a right topic, spelling and grammar check, collection of appropriate content, etc.

Weblogs

A weblog or blog can be thought of as an online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so.

A weblog is an excellent tool to develop creative aspects of language use in English. Primarily, a weblog is a great tool to develop various levels of writing. Mechanics of writing such as sentence types, paragraph, headings and subheadings, punctuation, use of fonts and conventions of writing such as bold letters, italics, etc., and, in fact, the structure and design of an essay, story or any article can be taught through the practice of producing weblogs.

However, we should also remember that creating a weblog and maintaining it is a higher skill. Weblogs may be introduced as a group activity for the class.

Considerable amount of time is required to develop weblogs and mutual consultations and discussions precede such constructions of weblogs. If these consultations and discussions are carried out through English conversations, advanced classes of learners and users of English in colleges such as those specializing in engineering, medicine, etc. will greatly benefit.

Three kinds of blogs can be suggested for teaching English through the Internet. They are:

1. Teacher Blog

This is a type of weblog is run by the teachers for the learners. Any entry made by the teacher can and ought to encourage further exploration of the Internet in English by linking to related articles, and content based websites. Leading students to interesting English language sites will increase their confidence. At the bottom of each entry, any blog reader can make a comment that can be read and further commented on by all who access the site. Entries in the blog can also serve to remind students about homework assignments and upcoming discussion topics. Links can be provided to sites that introduce relevant topics of discussion. In the right and/or left margin of the blog, permanent links can be set up and organized to aid the learner in self-study, for example, links to online quizzes, English news sites, audio and video files for listening practice and interactive websites.

2. The Learner Blog

These are blogs that are either run by individual learners themselves or by small collaborative groups of learners. The act of constructing the learner blog may encourage the use of search engines and net surfing in English to find the appropriate sites to which links can be made. This will empower the learner to direct the reader to sites of choice for further reading.

Individually, blogs can be used as journals for writing practice, or as free-form templates for personal expression. The idea here is that students can get writing practice, develop a sense of ownership, etc. In addition, whatever they write can instantly be read by anyone else and, due to the comment features of the software, further exchange of ideas is promoted.

3. The Class Blog

This type of blog is the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class. In conversation-based classes it could be used like a free-form bulletin for learners to post messages, images, and links related to class room discussion topics. It could also be a space for them to post thoughts on a common theme assigned for homework. With intermediate and advanced learners, class blog might also be useful for facilitating project-based language learning, where learners can be given the opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create an online resource for others. Class blogs can also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange. In this scenario, learners from different countries would have joint access and publishing rights to the blog. The entire exchange would then be made transparent to all readers and could be followed and commented on by other learners, teachers, parents and friends.

For finding out weblog software on the net, there are numerous choices at present, all of which have different features. Some weblog software is run on a central, web-based server, while others require downloading and installing on local server. Some weblog software is free, while others may charge a minimum as yearly subscription charges. Top free weblog software providers are WordPress, Blogger.com, GreyMatter, Live Journal, Xanga and so many.

This paper is just a humble attempt at suggesting simple ways to make the students learn the English language effectively as well as interestingly through the Internet.

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