Effective Use of Web-Based Resources for Enhancing ESL Learning Environment

Solaimalai Rajaram

Associate Professor of English, Thiagarajar College of Engineering, Madurai-625 015
E-mail: sreng@tce.edu

ABSTRACT

Web-based education is a growing concern all over the world and there have been efforts on its application into language teaching or complementing the traditional system with virtual learning and teaching. The author, ignited by his passion for the use of multimedia, and inspired by his two-decade experience in an engineering college, shares his practical experience in exploring web-based-learning resources to develop computer-assisted learning tools to enliven the ESL learning. This paper addresses how to begin the process of downloading resources on the web, how to use the educational content of those resources and how to design and build the actual resource. The paper throws light on some important authentic web-pages which contain a wide range of web-based learning resources. The key software used for the creation of the tools and the important websites for downloading the software are also highlighted. The computer-assisted learning tools with more salient features, such as individualized learning process and immediate feedback keep the ESL learning environment student-centered and fun-loving. Realising the need for digitized learning, this article guides the teachers of English to discover the web-based learning resources for designing their own tools for enhancing ESL learning environment.

Key Words: ESL – English as a Second Language; ELT- English Language Teaching; ICT- Information Communication technology

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Research Article

With the focus on language and communication, foreign language teachers should keep searching for better ways of accessing authentic materials and providing experiences that will improve their students' knowledge and skills. Teaching English is not only chalking and talking but making students communicate effectively. A successful teacher of English empowers his learners by enabling them to communicate efficiently and leading them from dependent stage to independent stage and independent stages. This is possible only if the teachers are active and creative and the learning environment is non-threatening, frivolous and fun-loving. In the world of digitised learning, it is essential that we, teachers of English, should think of some innovative methodologies to make the teaching and learning process more informative, interactive, and interesting.

Multimedia - the combination of text, pictures, audio, and video on a single platform - seems to hold great potential for enhancing “commutainment” in a learning environment. Computers and the Internet are so widespread today that one feels outdated, if not using them. Due to the impact and influence of information technology on society and education, computer-assisted language learning is becoming the trend in foreign language teaching (Shih-Jen, Huang, 2000). Computer and its attached language learning programs could provide second language learners more independence from classrooms and allowing learners the option to work on their learning material at any time of the day. With the great development of computers and Internet, more and more second language teachers and learners are using computers for foreign language teaching and learning today. (Wang Han, 2008).

In a constantly technologically developing world, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays a crucial role and affects our way of life. As the Internet has transformed communication around the world, it is natural that it should play a major role in the foreign language classroom. The use of ICT is a pleasant process for the pupil because with the use of various tools (i.e. multimedia) the course becomes attractive, his/her attendance is increased and his/her interest is retained (Raptis, A. and Rapti, A. 2003) In general terms, the web-based ELT, creates a fertile learning environment, particularly for the acquisition of a second/foreign language. Students can work in teams (collaborative and cooperative learning) and thus learn one with the help of each other. Consequently, the potential role of the Web in formal education should be taken into consideration.

The computer has an edge over other educational aids. A user has necessarily to interact if a programme is to proceed from one stage to another, the computer does not let him to be a passive viewer but an active learner. While the conventional teaching aids are involved in one-way teaching, obliging the learners to play a passive role,
the computer with its interactive ability can elicit responses from learners and respond to them immediately. In a classroom-situation the teacher’s continuous talks and dominating personality lead to a passive response or mere absorption of information. In a one-to-one interaction with the computer, learning becomes less inhibiting and more individualised. The machine scores over the human beings since it is unemotional and unsympathetic therefore, objective, impartial, accurate and untiring.

Learning does not have to be a pressure but pleasure. Significantly, free e-learning sites can provide a lot of fun games and communicative activities, and reduce the learning stress and anxieties, and therefore the web-based teaching and learning plays a key role in personalizing the learning environment. In this regard, the creation and use of computer-assisted learning tools by suing the rich Web resources can reduce the discomfort of students, arouse their interest and involvement and eventually it turns out to be a positive side of learning. With a variety of hyperlinked multimedia documents and computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, the Web can support language teachers to integrate Web resources into the language classroom (Shetzer, H., and Warschauer, M. 2000).

Moreover, the multimedia nature of the Web is essential for the delivery of authentic materials, including texts, images, sound recordings, video clips, virtual reality worlds and dynamic, interactive presentations. All these characteristics can allow the student to work in numerous ways with the authentic materials found on the page. Mostly, young teachers tend to use ICT applications and resources, such as the Internet, CD-Rom, and power point presentation. Meanwhile, search engines, Email, chatting software, blogs, and online resources appear to be rarely used by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers. In the digital world of learning, since technology and computerization are mushrooming rapidly, the teachers of English should keep themselves abreast of high-tech advances in the field of teaching to cater to the seasonal needs of students. The teachers of English should not end up with the existing computer-assisted learning packages but they should readily come forward to explore the internet and exploit the web-based learning resources to create their own learning tools.

The advent of the Internet and the wide spread of technology in our life create new opportunities for language learning (Krajja, Jarek, 2000). In the digital world, as computer reaches more children in many developing countries, so too in many cases, is the Internet. It can be a great Educational Tool. Since nearly 80% of the Internet content is only in English, the teachers of English can gain access to the enormous variety of authentic teaching materials relating to all spheres of life at almost no cost. Thus, the Web is an invaluable treasure of information for teachers to create classroom materials and to explore the whole world just by clicking the mouse. First, teachers should prepare themselves for the use of modern computer technology.

Realizing the pressing need of the effective use of web resources for enhancing the ESL environment, let us now learn how to create the multi-media tools by downloading the rich educational and informative Web resources to better adapt educational content to the specific needs and preferences of the digital learners. There are various websites from which audio, video, stories, pictures, photographs, cartoons, comics, lesson plans, work sheets, and language games can freely be downloaded. These web-based resources add vast depth to traditional instruction materials. Incorporation of the multi-media tools into the language curriculum engages students in more communicative, authentic, contextualized, and interactive activities that practice all four skills in an integrated fashion. Now, let us identify some of the useful and authentic websites for downloading the resources for developing computer-based teaching tools. These tools can really engage the learners and so they could listen, recall, understand, apply, evaluate and create with interest and enthusiasm.

Some websites for downloading audio and video files:

- www.youtube.com
- http://teachertube.com
- www.engvid.com
- www.bbclearningenglish.co
- www.britishcouncil.org/kids.htm
- www.britishcouncil.org/central.htm
- www.bestofgooglevideos.com
- www.indiatimes.com
- www.ndtv.com
- www.timesnow.tv
- http://newsy.missouri.edu
- http://teachertube.com
- www.schooltube.com
- www.vaonews.com/specialenglish
Some websites for downloading lessons, exercises, and tests for ELT

- www.storynory.com (Audio stories)
- www.free-english-study.com (ESL lessons and practice)
- www.esgold.com (English lessons and test on grammar, reading, speaking)
- www.es-lab.com (ESL Cyber Listening Lab)
- www.englishmedialab.com (Free interactive exercises)
- www.freeenglishnow.com (Self-study English course for professionals)
- www.englishfreeware.com (Self-Study English course for professionals)
- www.real-english.com (New ESL EFL Videos and Lessons)
- www.onestopenglish.com (High Quality Resources for Teachers of English)
- www.focusenglish.com (Online Listening Tests)

The audio and video files can be downloaded by Real Player, YouTube Downloader or 123 Video Downloader Uploader. Next, the audio files can be converted into the popular formats such as MP3 or WMA Audio format. The different types of video files such as 3GP, ASF, AVI, FLV, GIF, MOV, MP4, MPEG can be converted into the most compatible format i.e. WMV so that they can very easily be incorporated into our multimedia tool. There are also many user-friendly audio and video converters such as Any Audio Converter and Total Video Converter. In addition, the website Zamzar is a free online file conversion tool, which can be used to helping you transform your songs, videos, images and documents into different required formats. The audio/video editing software can be downloaded from the websites such as www.ddl2.com, www.dl4all.com, www.brothersoft.com, www.softpedia.com, www.filehippo.com, and download.cnet.com.

We can also make use of the software Cool Edit Pro, VCD Cutter and DVD Cutter for editing the source files according to our requirements. In addition, the teachers can also have a Handy Cam and Voice Recorder so as to record anything they find useful in any real life situation so that they can also be imported into their tools. Initially, the audio and video sources can be inserted into a Power Point Presentation along with language learning activities. Then, the PPT can then be converted into a video by using another software Moyea PPT to Video Converter. When the Internet is properly explored, everything can be made available to provide richness to the teaching and learning environment.

Ignited by my passion for the use of multimedia in ELT, and inspired by my experience in an engineering college with my colleagues and student friends, I have made a maiden attempt in developing two computer-assisted learning tools “Listening Practice” and “English Sounds” to promote individualized learning environment. It is a simple tailor-made video with a collection of various interesting audio and video resources downloaded from the Internet. The tools include listening exercises, situational conversations, inspiring speeches, educational videos, inspiring movie clips, cine songs, cartoons, photographs, animations with various language learning exercises. From the feedback of my students, it is understood that the tools provide learner’s autonomy and therefore they enrich the learning experience.

As for the teachers’ attitude towards the web-based learning the majority (91.3%) stated that they like using computers for teaching purposes, feel confident using the Internet and are willing to devote their time online (Dogoriti, Evriklea, 2010). In general, teachers have a positive attitude towards Information Communication Technology and believe that online learning has the potential to enhance their English teaching as long as it is easily accessible and tailored to their actual needs in primary foreign language education. At the same time the importance of selecting good web sites and always supporting students throughout the process is very much emphasized. The teachers should be trained and encouraged to use e-learning materials in English language teaching. Thus, amidst the phenomenal developments in the context of information technology, since education for the 21st century still needs a lot of rethinking on modernization and creation of hi-tech educational tools, the teachers of English should grab the web-based resources and develop creative computer-assisted learning tools for making ESL learning environment more enjoyable and encouraging.

REFERENCES


