CREATIVE ENCOUNTERS WITH ENGLISH ON THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

Improvement in the teaching of English as a second language is a concern among many teachers of English today. New sources of information are sought for to discover effective ways of teaching. A currently favoured but not widely explored means of teaching the English language is via the Internet. The Internet offers a variety of resources which teachers can use to make the teaching of English more interesting and effective. Apart from teaching materials teachers can get a lot of information on new developments in the teaching of English. This paper discusses how teachers can use Internet based resources to make their lessons mor effective and interesting. Evidence of the effectiveness of Internet based resources is taken from a research study which was recently conducted. The findings of this study showed that teachers were able to be creative and resourceful in the language classroom. This paper also offers alternative techniques of teaching of English as a second language using the Internet. It presents the teaching resources which are available on the Internet and describes creative ways of using them.

Introduction

Improvement in the teaching of English as a second language is a concern among many teachers today. New sources of information are sought for to discover effective ways of teaching. A currently favoured but not widely explored means of teaching the English language is via the Internet.

The Internet provides a variety of resources for both teachers and learners. It has enabled teachers and learners to obtain information regarding the teaching and learning of English from various parts of the world. There are articles on the teaching of English and examples of lesson plans provided on the Internet. These are of great value to the classroom teacher. The students too, will benefit from the resources on the Internet. A variety of language activities and exercises are available for students to access. These resources cater to students of various proficiency levels. The students merely have to select those which are appropriate for them.

The Internet has provided a means of teaching and learning the English language. Teachers and learners of English are at an advantage as the resources on the Internet are in English. It has been discovered that the resources have been very useful to both teachers and learners of English (Abas and Mohtar, 1996). Teachers have been able to access numerous teaching materials within a short period of time without having to move around a lot to look for teaching materials or spend time producing materials. They can thus use their time more efficiently for teaching. Given the resources, teachers can be creative in order to suit these resources to the needs of their students.

In the study conducted by Abas and Mohtar (1996), the teachers c!aimed that the materials on the Internet had a positive influence on student learning. The students found the materials interesting and hence they enjoyed doing the activities. The teachers also reported that the students were more motivated to learn and were more confident in using the English language The activities stimulated creative and critical thinking among the students.

The findings in this study (Abas and Mohtar, 1996), have shown that students learn when they enjoy doing a task. Hence learning takes place when there is some element of fun and enjoyment. The emphasis now is not so much on the choice of a better teaching method to encourage learning, but on how learners learn so that the appropriate teaching method is employed. Since learners find materials on the Internet interesting and stimulating, teachers need to cater to their needs by making the lessons interesting and stimulating too. Additionally, since the teachers can now find ample teaching materials on the Internet they can develop more ideas about making teaching the English language more effective. In other words, they can be creative. They can also enhance their creativity by working on the Internet.

Progressive learning

The idea of enhancing learning as well as creativity by using the Internet is in line with the progressivist view of learning. This approach to learning places emphasis on ways the learner constructs new knowledge. According to this approach, knowledge is seen as "a creative problem-solving capacity that depends upon a ability to retrieve appropriate schemata from a mental store, to utilise whatever can be automatically brought to bear upon a situation and to bend existing conceptual structures to the creation of novel concepts that offer a working solution to the particular problem in hand" (Clark,1987: 49). This approach differs from existing approaches, the emphasis of which is on ways the learners receive knowledge. The behaviourist approach stresses the use of reinforcement or the external conditions of learning as the main element in the learning process. The cognitive theory explains how learners receive information and process information using short-term and long-term memory. The progressivist approach looks at ways learners construct new knowledge and does not merely deal with how they receive it. Learners can organise their previous experiences and beliefs when they come across real events of the world. Teachers are viewed not as instructors but as "creators of an

environment in which learners learn and learn how to learn" (Clark, 1987: 49). The progressivists place great emphasis on the need for learning by doing. The Internet thus provides students with the opportunity and motivation to do something to obtain information in order to learn.

Creativity

According to Eggen and Kauchak (1994:229), "creativity is the ability to create original and divergent products in the solution of some problem." The definition of "original" in this paper refers to "something that is done without the knowledge that it has been done before" (Smith, 1992:74). According to Smith (1992:74) "creative thinking occurs despite the fact that someone has done the same thing before". Smith (1992) believes that one can be creative without being innovative. Edward de Bono (1995:119) defines creativity as a "search for alternatives". This, he feels is "the most basic of afl creative operations".

The term "divergent" in the definition of "creativity" is meant to incorporate "fluency" and "flexibility". Both terms have been adopted from Guilford (1967). Fluency refers to the ability to produce many ideas relevant to a problem and flexibility is the ability to break from an established set to produce new perspectives (Eggen and Kauchak, 1994:229).

Creative encounters

The term "creative encounters" in this paper is used to refer to firstly, the resources which are new to teachers and students. They are new in terms of the content they present and also in terms of the manner in which the students can do the exercises or activities. The resources produced include articles from newspapers, magazines and journals, essays, stories, lessons and lesson plans. They are authentic as they are original contributions of the writers and are meant for Internet users to use. They are thus meant for real purposes. The manner in which these resources are used is specific to the technology used. The use of the computer enables the user to move from page to page easily. The user merely clicks the mouse and a new page appears. This system appears to be more convenient for the user compared to turning the pages of a book. The physical skills employed in order to read the texts on the screen of the monitor are different from those used when reading a book. The user can read the text on the screen at eye-level. This position may be more comfortable than when one reads a book at a table. He or she does not have to bend his or her head as when reading a book placed on a table. Besides that, when using the computer, the user can move his or her hands fairly freely without worrying that the pages may accidentally fLip over.

These "creative encounters" are also different from those offered on CD-ROM. The use of the Internet is more creative than that of the CD-ROM (Compact Disc-Read Only

Memory). The Internet allows the user to make connections to sites all around the world and hence obtain a variety of resources. These resources cover a wide range of subjects and topics. The CD-ROM restricts the user to a particular subject only or to what is available on the disc.

Another area of creativeness is the provision of feedback. Although feedback can be given by the teacher during lessons in the classroom, the large number of students in the classroom limits the "frequency and quality of feedback that a given student will receive" (Ross and Morrison, 1993: 180). On the Internet the learner can get immediate feedback on responses made. Activities which enable the learner to get feedback include those on grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary and writing. The learner is able to get information regarding his or her performance (i.e. knowledge of results or external feedback) at the end of each activity. This type of feedback allows the learner to get knowledge-of-response feedback (KR) and knowledge of correct response feedback (KCR). The former (KR) shows that the learner's response was correct or incorrect and the latter (KCR) identifies the correct answer. The learner will not be able to get the results until the whole activity or exercise is completed. Such an activity allows the learner to make a number of attempts in order to improve his or her performance. However, the learner will not learn much unless he takes note of information about his or her actual movements (Romiszowski, 1988). This information can come from the teacher or from inside the learner. He or she may note the "feel" of the move made which has produced good results (Romiszowski, 1988). This form of feedback is referred to as internal feedback. The two forms of feedback (external and internal) are essential to the mastery of the skill learned (Romiszowski 1988: 293). Knowledge of results which is sometimes called "learning feedback" is crucial for effective learning (Romiszowski, 1998:294).

"Creative encounters" in this paper is also used to refer to alternative ways of using the Internet resources. These resources can be used by teachers in a way that is different from the way they were intended to be used. The use of the Internet resources depends on the objectives of the lesson. The teacher can devise ways which are novel to the students to help them improve their learning.

The teacher can use resources on the Internet for classroom teaching and obtain greater satisfaction than when the textbook is used. A research study conducted in some Malaysian schools (Abas and Mohtar, 1996) has revealed that teachers found that they were able to teach more effectively when they used the Internet. They discovered that they saved time looking for appropriate teaching materials. They also found the materials on the Internet very interesting.

Use of Internet resources

The use of Internet resources in this paper is restricted to that of reading texts on the web pages and doing the activities by the point-and-click technique using the mouse or by

writing on paper. Interactive activities such as e-mailing to other students as well as to writers of the resources produced are not included because consideration is given to students who have access to the Internet but are not provided with e-mail addresses. This situation is common in many schools with Internet facilities.

Examples of use of resources on the Internet:

The following are some suggestions for exploiting resources on the Internet:

1. Project work

    a. Teacher provides a topic based on those given in the current syllabus, for example, sports, famous people, places and so on.
    b. Students work in groups to gather information on the Internet regarding the topic given. Students search various sites to locate relevant information. They can then download the information obtained.
    c. Students piece the information together to produce a report.

2. Interactive writing.

    a. Teacher identifies a web page which provides letters or accounts of personal experiences, particularly of handicapped people who have used the Internet.
    b. Students find ways of communicating with such people by writing letters to them.
    c. Students prepare an interview with one of these people.
    d. Students role play in pairs. One student becomes the interviewer and the other the handicapped person.

3. Journal

    a. Teacher asks students to obtain information on a certain topic such as culture.
    b. Students find information on aspects of a certain culture for example, a birthday celebration.
    c. Students add their own experiences of celebrating their birthdays.
    d. Students write about their beliefs regarding birthdays.
    e. Students compare various ways of celebrating a birthday.

4. News scanning

    a. Teacher asks students to look up news which is common in newspapers in English from all over the world.
    b. Students find news that is common in most parts of the world.
    c. Students locate similarities and differences in the news reported.
    d. Students discuss why similar events happen in different parts of the world.
    e. Students discuss whether such events can affect the situation in our country.
    f. Students discuss the good and bad aspects of such events in relation to the world.

5. Stories and fables

   a. Students search for fables and stories, from many countries, which are similar to those found in their own community.
   b. Students compare the foreign stories and fables to those found in their own community and discuss how and why they differ or are similar.
   c. Students create their own stories based on those from the foreign countries.

6. Idioms

   a. Students read and understand idioms given on the web page.
   b. Students explain how these idioms came about based on what they know about the idioms or based on their imagination.
   c. Students write a story to explain the origin of an idiom.

7. Creative writing

   a. Students explore the web pages and look for some interesting pages.
   b. Students then choose an interesting topic each, for example, "Visiting a Campus" and then write an account of that topic.
   c. Students explain why they have chosen that particular page.

The teacher can conduct the activities above by

   a. providing worksheets with instructions for students to follow
   b. using the instructions given in the web pages
   c. making students take down notes from the web pages
   d. printing information given in the web pages.

Conclusion

The Internet serves as an enormous virtual library. Teachers and students are able to locate and access information very easily. It is fascinating even to weak learners. They are able to develop their self-esteem when they can discover new things by themselves. According to Corbett (1997), the excitement of searching and discovering will help students widen their knowledge as well as their confidence and self-esteem. The wealth of information on the Internet will be wasted if it is not well managed. The Internet makes available a wide range of resources but it does not specify how they are to be used. It is up to the teachers to devise ways and means of utilising these resources. To enable them to do this it is necessary to equip them as well as their students with search skills to enable them to make use of the resources provided.

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