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THE INTERNET AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Review by Caroline Ho Mei Lin

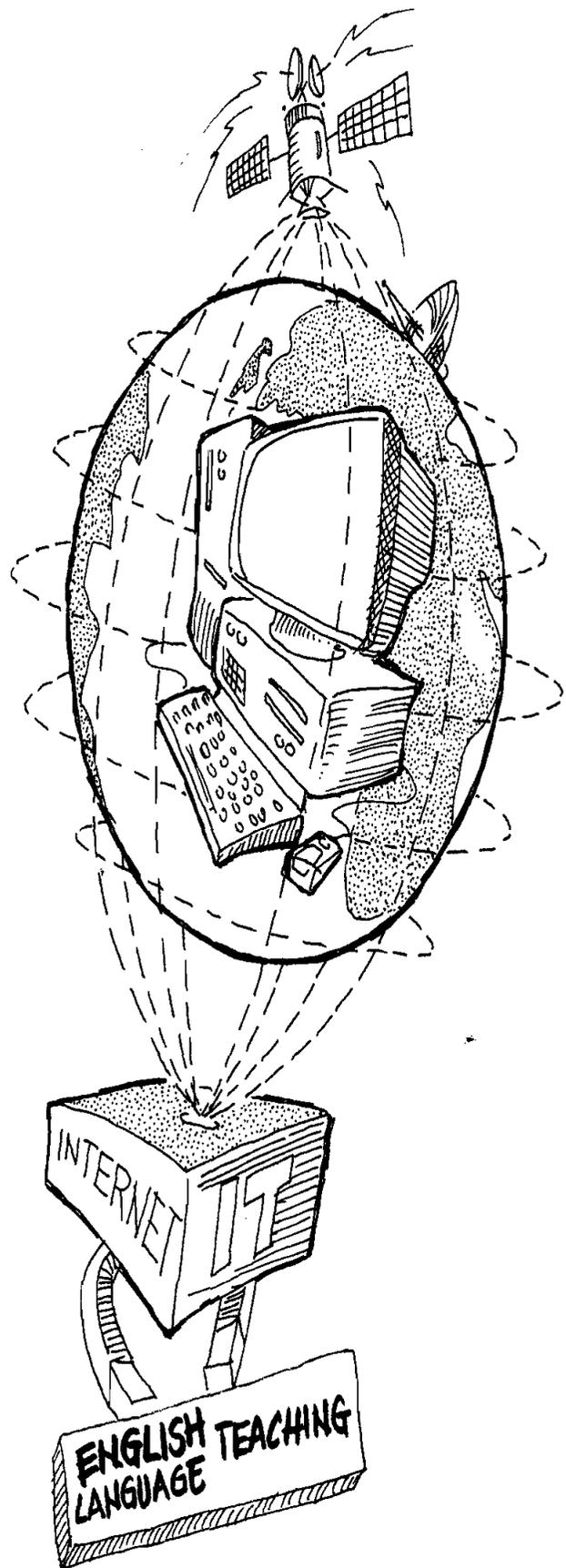
INTRODUCTION

How we learn and how we teach are fast changing due to advances in technology in the current communications revolution which is rapidly making inroads into schools, universities, businesses and homes. The network of electronic connections is bringing people closer to each other than ever before through an inexpensive and instantaneous mode of communication. In order to ensure that the exciting possibilities afforded by computer mediated communications provide meaningful learning experiences, language teachers need to be aware of and actively involved in making the best possible use of what is available.

This article focuses on a few of the facilities provided by current technology, namely, electronic mail utility, discussions lists, newsgroups and the World Wide Web and the impact they have on English Language (EL) teaching.

THE INTERNET

The Internet ('The Net') is an extensive resource and communication network linking other computer networks across the world. The size, geographical spread and the speed of transfer and reception of information offered by the Net are rapidly revolutionising the way information is received and transmitted. The Net offers an array of facilities which can be broadly categorised, for our purpose, into information retrieval and communication.



Information retrieval

The World Wide Web

The World Wide Web contains millions of electronic pages, graphics, photographs and video clips, which provides immediate access to a worldwide database of information. It provides teachers and pupils with not only a large repository of resources but also an opportunity to publish and share their own work. The range, authenticity and topicality of the resources are invaluable to teachers and pupils. According to Eastment (1996, p.34), the Web, given its ease of use and accessibility, will continue to grow in importance in EL teaching because it is:

- fast becoming a gateway to other Internet resources
- developing from a set of static resources to something more interactive and dynamic.

Although the Web serves as a useful repository of resources, there is a need, however, for teachers to be aware that there is material currently available on the Web which provides dubious information. Much of what exists presently tends to “*represent a triumph of form over content*” (Eastment, 1996, p.32). Sites for EL teaching may feature sparse content and limited or restricted skills-based tasks or activities which do not effectively develop specific language skills. What is provided may also not differ from what is available in other forms of printed material which seek to merely test rather than teach specific language skills. Also, the target learners for the resources may not necessarily be second or foreign learners of EL but native speakers of EL.

Electronic communication

a. Electronic mail

Where the classroom is concerned, electronic mail (email) is more widely used than other services of the Net. Warschauer’s (1995b) study of how the Net is used in language teaching revealed that over 50% of the 125 cases were devoted to email activities.

Email enables communication using computer networks and telephone lines. The speed, efficiency, environmentally friendly (paperless) and cost-effective way of sending messages has much to offer the language teacher. It provides authentic, natural communication using the target language in a real setting which is motivating in itself. In addition to encouraging independent learning, the practice of communication and sharing of resources, materials and ideas through email offers opportunities for collaboration and research among students and teachers. Communication via email can take the form of electronic dialogue journals with teachers’ responses to students’ entries through questions, answers and feedback transmitted electronically, and writing conferences in a computer-networked environment which promote collaborative work among students and revisions of drafts based on electronically-transmitted comments.

b. Discussion lists

Email discussion lists provide teachers with the means to collaborate with each other to obtain information, materials and resources that will help in teaching. These are services which receive contributions from subscribers and automatically mail



them out to everyone who has subscribed to that discussion list. Each list with its own purpose, scope and potential subscribers, connects people with similar interests. Queries, viewpoints, announcements and other information of interest are sent automatically to members on the list with the result of replies received almost instantaneously. The speed, simplicity, cost-effectiveness and accessibility of discussion lists are a useful resource for teachers. However, the quantity of messages generated does not always result in consistently high standards of quality of content which may be rambling, irrelevant or ill-thought out.

c. Newsgroups

USENET (Users Network) newsgroups offer easy, fast and inexpensive sharing of resources and ideas among people all over the world. The newsgroups cover a wide spectrum of topics which are threaded, with responses to specific comments listed in order by topic. Newsgroups lend

themselves readily to working with pupils as they encourage and stimulate discussion and debate on up-to-date issues. They are, however, not entirely free from irrelevant and trivial material.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Research on **electronic communication** within the EL classroom generally yields positive language learning results. Studies have shown that for language learners, it is the *communicative* facilities of the Net rather than the resources offered that are actively tapped by teachers and pupils.

Cook (in Warschauer, 1995a) studied ESL writing courses at Kapiolani Community College, Honolulu where all classes are taught 100% on line with pupils writing in pairs, small groups and as a class. The programme involved the writing process, electronic discussion of what they have read, critique of their own work and collaborative writing of essays. The impact

of real-time electronic discussion on the teaching of writing was evident not only with regard to the role of the teacher (which shifted from being a mere repository of knowledge to a facilitator and guide) but also on pupils who gained confidence in expressing ideas in writing. The more they wrote, the more comfortable they became in writing in this powerful, communicative context with a meaningful purpose of communicating with a real, authentic audience.

Pratt and Sullivan's (1994) study of the effects of computer networking on teaching ESL writing at the University of Puerto Rico revealed strong differences in participation patterns. 50% of pupils participated once during oral discussion as compared to 100% pupil participation in electronic discussion. Also, there was a reduced participation of teachers in discussion with 15% of turns in electronic discussion as compared to 65% in oral discussion. Holistic rating of pre and post writing samples also showed marked improvement in the writing of students in the computer-networked classrooms compared to those in the traditional classroom with oral discussion. This was confirmed in studies by Hartman *et al* (1991) and Marbitto (1991, 1992) which revealed that electronic discussions also contributed to more useful peer editing comments and resulted in more revisions in students' writing.

Kern's work (1993) at the University of California, Berkeley indicated that students' language showed a wider variety of discourse functions and a more sophisticated range of morphosyntactic features in addition to stimulating students' interest in one another which contributed to peer learning and decreased reliance on the teacher. Kern recommends that electronic discussions precede oral discussions as this allows focus on the ideas at hand without undue anxiety

over the articulation and delivery of the ideas discussed.

Similar positive effects were seen in studies across cultures. Tella's (1991, 1992a, 1992b) study of email exchanges between Finnish and British pupils yielded the following results:

- *improved quality of writing with a real purpose and international audience*
- *more versatile modes of writing from personal, expressive to argumentative genres*
- *opportunity to practise language in open-ended linguistic situations with the emphasis shifting from form to content as well as expressions, idioms and vocabulary*
- *more revisions to texts and increased peer tutoring and other collaborative methods in composing*
- *more public and collaborative reading in addition to the use of different reading styles*
- *a switch from a teacher-centred, large-group sponsored teaching toward a more individualized and learner-centred working environment.*

CONCLUSION

While current technology offers a wide range of opportunities for EL teaching and learning, the facilities and resources available can remain at best only as *tools* to aid or enhance the learning process. They can and should not be seen to replace the teacher, nor should they be regarded as the be-all and the end-all of instruction. What they offer teachers is, as Warschauer (1995a, p. 65) puts it, "*a powerful new tool that can help teachers implement good pedagogy; not a magic wand that, once waved, replaces previous pedagogy.*"

IMPLICATIONS

- 1 Teachers need to be selective in their choice and identification of resources from the Net for use in the EL lesson.** The danger is to fall into the trap of being easily overwhelmed and/or distracted by the range of resources available and to treat the Internet as merely a vast repository of resources. Teachers may find themselves with a new passion for collecting lists of sites on the Net without carefully and critically assessing the potential for use in the EL classroom.

For example:

The following criteria could be considered in the choice of resources: relevance of material to the curriculum, domain of skills focused on (e.g. speaking, listening, reading, writing, thinking), clarity of presentation, effective use of colour, sound, graphics and animation features to enhance impact, and the extent to which the material is motivating for students.

- 2 They need to consider how best to integrate specific objectives and resources into the school's instructional programme.** The use of the Internet should not be merely an optional extra but support and enhance or develop the school's existing instructional programme.

For example:

The theme and language skill under consideration, could be integrated into the curriculum. Arguments raised in specific 'threads' of newsgroups, for instance, could be used by teachers to engage students in a debate relating to the topic which could then be followed up with a writing task. A project which involves research related to a specific theme, for instance, mass media, would necessitate information gathering from available resources on the Net and could also be extended to human sources such as students in other countries. There would be comparing and contrasting of information, analysing data, researching and writing a report, and making a final presentation.

- 3 Teachers need to provide opportunities for the stimulation of thinking skills.** The ease, speed and accessibility of retrieving and transmitting information could lull teachers into designing tasks or activities which merely require the simple manipulation of keys and commands to access information. There is a need to help teachers work towards the stimulation of thinking skills that take pupils beyond merely absorbing information to assimilating synthesising and reconstructing what is gleaned from the Net into a comprehensible, meaningful and purposeful form. Tasks or activities designed with the use of the Net could incorporate thinking skills that require comparing, classifying, inducing, deducing, analysing errors, constructing support, abstraction and analysing perspectives (Marzano, 1992).

- 4** *They also need to rethink the way current assessments are carried out.* With the change in the nature of tasks or activities and assignments based on the use of the Net, present modes of assessments need to be reviewed. The move away from a pen and paper set-up to include real time communication and collaboration over extended periods of time would need to take into account the *processes* involved in the course of completing the task, the multiple drafts, extent of discussion and exchange of views that preceded the completion of the task or project.
- 5** *Teachers need to consider the management of collaborative learning and the monitoring of the independent research and learning that could take place.* As Barson, Frommer and Schwartz's (1993) study suggests, there is a need to restructure test materials along communicative lines analogous to the projects being accomplished in order to reliably assess the state of the students' language use. The ultimate aim is for assessments to accurately, reliably and adequately assess pupils' gains in communicative competence and use of language.

Skills teachers require to use the Net

Lower level skills:

- *Having basic knowledge of computer skills* involves the ability to use a computer operating system including basic hardware (e.g. mouse, keyboard) and the understanding of basic terminology and concepts (e.g. icons, URL).
- *Navigating the extensive resources available* requires familiarity with search engines and online tools to obtain the necessary information from the Net.
- *Acquiring skills in electronic communication* involves knowing how to access electronic mail accounts and other related facilities, and familiarising oneself with the specific register of electronic communication.

Higher level skills:

- *Downloading resources and participating or contributing in sharing resources* involves the ability to access different network systems and the use of facilities such as bulletin boards, discussion lists, newsgroups and file transfer.
- *Selecting, evaluating and integrating of existing resources on the Net into the curriculum* requires an awareness of the aims and objectives of the school's instructional programme and students' learning needs to tailor the use of computer resources planned in lessons to meet those needs.
- *Setting up and using interactive multimedia for instructional purposes* involves the integration of various stimuli such as text, sound, photographs, pictures and video into an interactive learning system, such as creating and setting up one's own website.

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