

The Great Educational Technology Wall:

The benefits and difficulties of using the Internet as part of a foreign language teaching methodology in China

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ABSTRACT

As China continues to modernize at an exceptional rate, issues around integrating educational technology into foreign language teaching methodologies are becoming increasingly pertinent. This paper discusses some of the benefits and difficulties encountered when the Internet is used as a central teaching tool for students studying English as a foreign language in China. The merits of a particular strategy are also discussed. This strategy emphasizes placing a large amount of learning resources online – including lecture notes, contact information, examples of student work, and links to other learning resources on the World-Wide Web. Finally, the Internet is considered for its practicality as a learning tool from both the perspective of the institution (e.g. can schools afford to equip their classrooms with the necessary technology?) and the perspective of the student (e.g. is it feasible to require students to use the Internet as part of their studies?).

Keywords

Educational technology, Internet, foreign language teaching, methodology, learning English, China.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese academics have proposed that, since the 1700's, there have been two stages in the world modernization process: the first stage features developing an industrial economy, and the second is categorized by an information economy [1]. Assisted by China's recent entry into the World Trade Organization, the import of new technology, and an increasingly open policy towards foreign competition and investment, China is presently on the fast track towards the second level of modernization [1, 2, 3]. The development of the information technology sector has created new possibilities for integrating technology into the classroom, and as such, educational technology is an important consideration for developing new teaching methodologies in Chinese schools.

Educational technology encompasses many forms of media, including (but not limited to) slides, transparencies, overhead presenters, VCR's, cassette players, CD/DVD players, voice recorders, computers, projectors, and the

Internet. This paper focuses on the use of the Internet in particular, and discusses some of the benefits and difficulties with using the Internet as a central teaching resource for university students studying English as a foreign language in China. My discussion is only concerned with the use of the Internet as part of a methodology that includes a face-to-face component, and does not deal with a curriculum that is completely online (although that is also a worthwhile discussion).

As an English teacher in China at the Sino-Canadian International College (SCIC), Guangxi University, I have had the opportunity to develop a curriculum for my classes that uses the Internet as a central teaching tool. In discussing the benefits and difficulties with using the Internet as part of a teaching methodology, I refer to my experiences as a case study.

BENEFITS

Although initially developed and used by the U.S. military, the Internet found its roots of popularity and practicality in educational institutions [4]. It's only fitting, then, that universities all over the world are turning to the Internet as a means of enhancing and enriching the learning process. "The Internet and related media provide the opportunity to alter, enhance and otherwise improve traditional forms of instruction and research" [5]. The most common applications of the Internet for academia include:

- Developing websites for teaching and to facilitate students' access to course materials.
- Placing course syllabi and assignment descriptions online, which can be beneficial for both current and prospective students.
- Placing lecture notes (or lesson plans) online, which can be used for both classroom presentations and supplemental/review material.
- Using e-mail for students to ask questions, submit assignments, or to get information from their administration or teachers outside of classroom hours.

- Online discussions (synchronous/asynchronous) for both student-student and student-teacher dialogues.
- Remote access to online libraries and databases for easier access to research materials.
- Giving students access, through the World-Wide Web (WWW), to a large pool of knowledge to aide in learning, research, and in the exploration of different ideas and opinions.
- Using the WWW as a foreign language tool, allowing students to easily find online translators, dictionaries, and thesauruses.

A Class Website

The Sino-Canadian International College (SCIC) is a joint venture between Guangxi University and the Canadian Foundation Centre for International Education (CFCIE). SCIC offers a 2-year undergraduate English program, after which students move on to complete a major at Guangxi University in either English or another subject.

For the classes that I teach at SCIC – which are first-year Writing and Communication – I created a website to help the students in their pursuit to learn English (<http://www.sinocan.cn/student>). There are a number of different sections to the website, each designed to give students online access to important information about their studies.

Online Lecture Notes

The first section provides links to the course syllabi and lecture notes (or lesson plans). The classrooms at SCIC are all equipped with Internet-enabled computers and overhead projectors, and so I use the lecture notes to help teach my classes. I tell my students that since my entire lecture notes are online, the notes they take in class should only be to clarify and expand what I present to them - they do not need to unnecessarily take time to copy down everything that is shown. My philosophy is that, freed from the task of frantically trying to copy down all information that the teacher displays, as in a traditional chalk-and-blackboard scenario, students can pay more attention *in-class* to absorbing and understanding the subject matter. Publishing lecture notes online also allows students to easily review past classes and study for upcoming exams.

In addition, the interactivity and multimedia capabilities of the Internet provide the potential for more stimulating and engaging lecture material. As for multimedia – text, graphics, audio and video can all be used to display information. As for interactivity – participatory learning objects can be created (using Macromedia Flash, JavaScript, etc.) for an active and engaging interactive learning experience inside or outside of the classroom.

Online Resources

The second section of my website is a list of external online resources to help students learn English. Under this section I have included a list of online dictionaries, ESL resources, and a list of popular search engines.

Online Student Focus

The third section focuses on the students themselves. Here I have links to photos of each of my students, a place to exhibit student work, and a listing of each student's current grades for assignments, quizzes and exams.

Online Contact Information

The last section is administrative – it provides contact information for both teachers and staff members.

In summary, the principle goals behind my development of a class website are:

- To facilitate student access to information, including lecture notes, online resources, and contact information.
- To alleviate the need for students to spend time copying down information, allowing for a more practical-based approach to in-class learning.
- To create a more interesting and engaging learning environment by making use of the Internet's vast pool of information and multimedia capabilities.

DIFFICULTIES

One might at first imagine that whatever difficulties are encountered from using the Internet as part of a teaching methodology are offset by its benefits, but this is not necessarily so, especially in China. What follows are some of the obstacles that often surface when implementing an Internet-enhanced teaching strategy, as well as some suggestions for working around them.

Costs and Accessibility

Perhaps the most obvious hindrance is cost. Technology can be expensive for both the educational institution and students. Whether an Internet-enhanced teaching methodology is effective is perhaps secondary to whether or not the school and/or students can afford it.

Costs for the Institution

Quite simply, it is expensive, and beyond the financial capability of many educational institutions, to equip every classroom with a computer, projector, Internet connection, and other such devices. Without a computer and a projector, any online course material would simply serve to supplement that which is taught in class, and thus all the benefits previously described relating to an Internet-enabled classroom would no longer be relevant.

Most educational institutions in China do not have the money for Internet-enabled classrooms, and so a teaching methodology that uses the Internet would be limited to only a select few schools, ones that probably charge a significantly higher tuition, and thus cater to the wealthier of society. For most schools in China, weighing the costs and benefits of an Internet-enhanced curriculum is irrelevant – they cannot afford the technology anyway. Recognizing this, however, does not necessarily detract from the merits of the Internet as a classroom tool *per se*, it only means that the technology is not available to the majority of schools in China.

Costs and Accessibility for the Student

Most students in China cannot afford a personal computer. In rural China, a teaching methodology that requires students to access the Internet is unfeasible – the technology and equipment just isn't there. For students in cities, however, accessing the Internet is less of a problem. Although students cannot afford their own computers, Internet bars (also called Internet cafés) are a common site in most Chinese cities. Presently, Internet bars target people looking to play computer games, send and receive e-mails, and chat online, but there is no reason why the same computers cannot be used for students to do research, type up assignments, and use the resources of the WWW to learn English. Just off campus from SCIC, for example, within a 1 km radius, there are over 20 Internet bars for people to use. Most of the computers have word processing programs installed, such as Microsoft Word, and cost on average 2 RMB (\$0.24 USD) an hour to use, which is well within the budget of practically all students. Every Internet café that I have visited in China has been on a high-speed broadband connection.

Printing, on the other hand, tends to be more expensive. At the Internet bars around SCIC which have a printer, the average fee is 7 RMB (\$0.85 USD) per page, and color printing is not available. Depending on the number of assignments and their length, the cost of printing can potentially become too expensive for many students. To get around this, I have told my students to either e-mail me their assignments or hand them in on floppy disc, which, for the most part, has been an effective strategy.

Computer Skills

For an effective teaching methodology that uses the Internet, both students and teachers need to have a certain level of computer proficiency. First of all, someone needs to build and maintain the course website. This is not necessarily the teacher themselves because the school could hire an online curriculum developer for this task, but the teacher would still need to know how to use the Internet, use search engines effectively, and be able to demonstrate basic computer skills to their students. For my courses, I created and maintained the website myself, which allowed me greater flexibility to add content, customize content, and change lesson plans at short notice. Although there are certain advantages to a teacher that is also the website developer, as long as there is effective communication between the teacher and the online course developer, there is no reason why this arrangement could not also work.

The level of computer proficiency required by students for the methodology to be effective is debatable, but at the very least the students need to know how to use a computer at the basic level, surf the Internet, and use e-mail. People from a Western country may take it for granted that a university student would know basic computer skills, but in China, where personal computers are a relatively new technology for the average citizen, a teacher cannot assume any computer literacy at all. With only a little coaching, all of my students have managed to submit assignments to me

via e-mail, although the majority of them still type up their essays within the body of the e-mail itself, not yet knowing how to send a file, such as a Word document, as an attachment to the e-mail.

Time

Time is an important consideration in a teaching methodology that uses the Internet heavily, especially a methodology in which the lecture notes are all published online. There tends to be a greater time investment required for the development of an online course than the development of a traditional one. For one thing, the website itself needs to be built, uploaded to a server, and then maintained and updated. Once the website has been created, however, the time requirements are equal or even less to what would be required for lecture preparation in other mediums. The reason for this is the ability to use HTML templates. Templates mean that new content need only be plugged into an existing framework, requiring identical or less time than the creation of a PowerPoint presentation or overhead transparencies.

The time requirements for the students can also, at first, be greater, but as their skill level improves, less and less time is needed to complete their tasks. For example, a certain investment of time would be required for a student to learn Microsoft Word, but, after having learned this program, Word can help students write essays more efficiently and with fewer mistakes. When Word detects a spelling mistake, for example, it immediately underlines the word in red; a grammar mistake is underlined in green.

There is the time required for the student to travel to the Internet bar, of course, which, given that most students cannot afford their own computer, is unavoidable for the time being. Luckily, most Chinese cities have so many Internet bars that the travel times are minimal.

Plagiarism

A student can plagiarize regardless of whether their course has an online component or not. However, does a course that uses the Internet encourage or facilitate plagiarism? I do not believe so, for as easy as it is to plagiarize, it is just as easy to detect it. Simply typing a sentence or two into a search engine is often all that is required to find the document that was plagiarized. There are also online companies that offer, for a fee, software to help teachers detect plagiarism in their students' work.

Habit and Tradition

Tradition is a fundamental component of Chinese society, and the Chinese still have strong Confucian ideals [2]. Along with tradition comes habit. Without a strong motivating force, Chinese students tend to be reluctant to change the way they have done things in the past. Prior to me, none of my students had ever been asked to type up an assignment on computer before. Even after explaining the benefits of typing up a document on computer, including the benefits of digital files, the assistance given by word processing programs, and the legibility gained from a printed essay, many students still wish to be able to hand-

write their assignments. Ironically, it is often the same students that go to an Internet bar to play the latest computer games – games which demand specific sets of computer skills to play them – that complain about having to type up assignments, or do not know how to send an e-mail attachment. As such, part of the difficulty in implementing an Internet-enhanced teaching strategy is convincing the students themselves of the benefits of using a computer and the Internet to learn English.

CONCLUSION

Having discussed the benefits and difficulties of using the Internet in a foreign language teaching methodology, it is my conclusion that the Internet is a valuable tool for enhancing, enriching, and offering innovation to a curriculum. The biggest obstacle to its realization is its economic feasibility on the part of the educational institution. The financial demands for Internet-enabled classrooms are great, and not within the reach of most schools in China. Those institutions that do have modern classrooms with the latest technology must also charge higher tuition, and therefore are often only affordable by students from wealthier families.

Given a school that can afford the infrastructure, however, and students that can afford to go there, I believe that an Internet-enhanced teaching strategy is greatly beneficial. The Internet allows new doors to be opened, offers greater

chances for innovation, and, if used with a solid pedagogy, can enrich the teaching and learning experience. In this situation, perhaps the only real obstacle is overcoming the students' perceived barriers to adopting computer and Internet-based technologies in their studies.

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