



ASPECTS OF THE INTERNET AND THEIR POSSIBILITIES FOR ELT: A SURVEY REVIEW

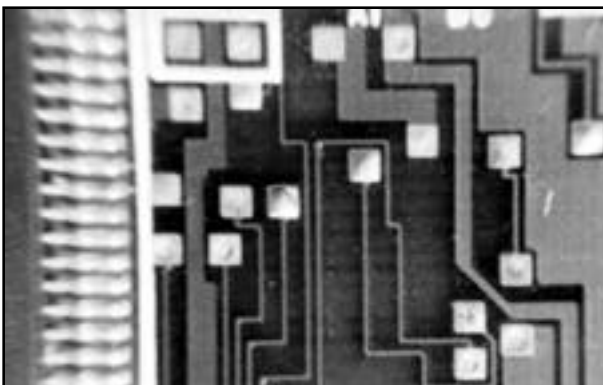
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Abstract

Since their early days, computers have promised much of interest for the language teaching classroom. Recognising and suitably implementing such potential has been problematic. The survey review below explores aspects of the Internet and in particular the World Wide Web - widely available, but currently little understood or used in schools. Features such as Electronic mail, Search Engines, and resources written specifically for ELT are explained.

Introduction

The relatively brief but fast-moving history of Information Technology (IT) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) can by now be described as being fully into its third major epoch. Epoch one, starting in the early 1980's, can be defined in terms of small, copiable grammar activities or text-reconstruction programmes, the latter best exemplified by *Storyboard*, that could be run from a single, cheaply-produced diskette on slow computers with a small hard-disk.



The second epoch, which began in the late 1980's, can be defined in terms of more interactive 'multi-media' with sound and text plus both still and moving colour images, produced on much larger 'read only' Compact disks (CD ROM's). These require faster, more powerful and (inevitably) more expensive technology. Suitable examples of such programmes would probably include the *Longman Interactive Dictionary*, *Business Territories 1* and Microsoft's encyclopaedia, *Encarta*, in which learners have more freedom to select which paths of knowledge or aspects of study to pursue.

Although programmes and technology from epochs one and two are by now more easily available and still in use, the current phase of CALL is dominated by the Internet and in particular the World Wide Web (WWW or the Web). Indeed, for many people, the Internet is the Web. But what are the origins of the Internet and is the Web, as Eastment (1996) states: "a triumph of form over content ... with only novelty appeal?" This article provides background to the Internet and in particular the World Wide Web. It then goes on to survey what I feel are the most useful facets of the Web for ELT so that teachers can answer Eastment's question for themselves. Where relevant, I have included the 'URL' s' - the Web site addresses.

The Internet

The history of the Internet dates back to 1969 and the Cold War when in the United States, 'Darpanet' (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency) decided to create a way for computers on different sites to communicate with each other over standard telephone lines in case of nuclear strike on one of these sites. As Hardy (1993) states: "Originally the Internet was a post-apocalypse command grid." What began as a military secret and was first used for educational purposes in the 1970's in the US in Higher Education, is now more widely available. Payment of a fee, generally between \$25 and \$35, plus the cost of using the phone line, allows unlimited access to the Internet to institutions and home users connected to the many local ISPs (Internet Service Providers), major international examples of which include *CompuServe*, *America Online* (AOL) and *Prodigy*. There are currently thought to be around 35 million computers connected to the Internet although this is increasing daily.

The WWW (The Web)

This began as an experimental project in 1989 at CERN in Switzerland and was perfected in 1993. It consists of thousands of documents and, at the last informed estimate, 320 million web-pages in English. All are linked by 'hypertext' - documents that have links embedded into other documents, hence the term 'web'. The Web is clearly the most widely used aspect of the Internet, with sites being posted all the time. Creating a web page is a relatively simple process using HTML (Hypertext Mark-Up Language) and even the humblest page may be posted free at www.geocities.com. Sites on the web range from the highly



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informative to the totally anarchic; many at first glance sound more appealing than they prove to be and others, neglected, become 'Cob-Websites'. The ability to simply point the cursor, click and move around the web with such ease is exiting, but critics feel it may lead only to superficial learning.

Applying IT to ELT

With the advent of individual users with dial-up accounts and the reduced cost and increased ability of items vital to IT such as modems and RAM, many educational institutions and ELT publications are investigating the value of the Internet to language learning. Various reports have been published and projects taken place; see in particular Eastment (1996), Motteram (1997) IATEFL ISSUES No. 144, 1998, ELTJ Vol. 50 / 1, 1996. However, with the many limitations on transmitting information via the Internet such as shortages of phone lines, it would be idealistic and naïve to believe that ELT could take advantage of the Internet in all corners of the globe at present. Eastment (1996) states: "The Internet remains accessible to only a tiny minority of the world's citizens."

IT and Linguistic Problems

Where access is possible, various reasons may be suggested for the reluctance of ELT to fully embrace the Internet. Clearly, the busy language teacher does not have the time or technology to browse large web sites in search of suitably relevant classroom material. It is also noticeable, however, that teachers and learners (as well as the layman) constantly need to acquire new lexis to keep up with all areas of IT. Although glossaries are often generously provided, both popular and technical terms, plus phrases, acronyms and abbreviations that would confuse the native-speaker are widely used in articles as well as in textbooks and 'Help' files that describe programmes. Terms like 'cursor', 'surfing' and 'flaming' can be especially confusing for the non-native speaker, whilst 'spamming', 'cookies' and 'Java applets' certainly have no culinary meaning in IT!

Bloor (1996) has dealt with non-native learner problems in this area and how different computer programmes often use a variety of terms with the same meaning. Such difficulties could easily be applied to teachers, both native and non-native. A suitable starting place for both would be Sperling (1998) and Eastment (1996). Dave Sperling has his own extensive site at www.escafe.com and was one of the first to explore the potential of the Web to ELT. Eastment's report is available in paper form and on the Internet. Both versions are extremely readable in that they

do not assume an audience with technical expertise.

Because of such problems as the above, I would also like to suggest that language teachers may have yet to fully realise the potential of the Internet and the Web.

The following sections of this article survey aspects of the Internet available for language teachers and take a closer look at a few specific possibilities for ELT. The following areas are dealt with:

- Learning about the Internet via the Internet
- Searching for Information on the Web
- E-Mail
- Software for ELT on the Web
- Resources on the Web for ELT

The first two concern the teacher as learner, whilst the others are more concerned with the teacher as classroom user of Web-based material.

Learning about the Internet via the Internet

Since little is available in print, background to the development of the Internet, where possible, may be found in post-graduate theses such as Hardy (1993): <http://www.oceanic.net/ftp/doc/nethist.html> . Unfortunately, the academic tone in such articles can often prove more confusing than enlightening.

A rather technical history of the Web (1980 - 1995) in diary format can be found at: <http://www.w3.org/history.html> . Of particular interest there is the first international conference about the Web (1994), also known as the 'Woodstock' of the Web.

A much more useful starting point for those new to the Web is *Beginners Central* that assumes far less computer background and is available at: <http://www.northernwebs.com/bc/> . This site lists alphabetically such esoteric acronyms as RAM, ROM, HTML, and MOO's.

Articles for those new to, and more fully versed with, the Web can be found at: <http://www.liszt.com/select> . Here, a variety of electronic newsletters can be accessed or subscribed to.



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Two other places with large amounts of information are Aston University's Language Studies Unit Web site:
<http://www.les.aston.ac.uk>
and Life on the *Internet Beginner's Guide* at:
<http://www.screen.com> .

Searching for Information on the Internet

On-line services or 'Portals', which are more commonly known for their Search Engines and Directories, are of immense value to language teaching; correct use can quickly produce much material although it is generally unmediated. Search facilities locate specified key words and concepts through large databases collected from the Internet. Most have between 14 - 20 categories of information, such as News, Sport and Hobbies. Directories, unlike Search Engines, are created by humans rather than robots; they organise web pages into categories that are sometimes reviewed and given ratings.

For very useful advice on restricting and refining your search with the large Search Engine, *AltaVista*, go to:
<http://www.altavista.com> .

Help on how to make any search more fruitful can be found at:
<http://www.wfi.fr/volterre/searchtips.html> .

Four other major search facilities include: *Excite* containing site reviews; *Yahoo*, one of the oldest and with a sub-directory for children called *Yahooligans*; *HotBot*, one of the largest, with over 54 million documents.

Also worth exploring for project work are On-Line libraries such as the *Electric Library* at:
<http://www.elibrary.com> .

This searches 150 newspapers and over 800 magazines and journals. Search results can, however, often lead to frustration when sites indicated turn out to be vehicles for adverts.

Electronic Mail (Email)

The ability to communicate by computer with anyone else around the world on the Internet is of vast potential use for learners of English. E-mail is a newly emerging written genre being given more and more space in ELT course books, for example *Kaleidoscope*. A starting point for teaching the differences between e-mail and traditional 'snail mail' letter writing is:
<http://enterprise.powerup.com.au/htmlxp/pu/emailhow.html>

The HUT e-mail project, an on-going international project

involving students in Asia, Europe and North America is available at:
<http://www.hut.fi/~rvilmi/Project> .

Free web-based e-mail accounts, accessible world wide via any service provider on any computer, can be found at
<http://www.hotmail.com> .

Learners may move on to Mailing lists which are topic-specific discussion groups on a large variety of areas. Lists for both teachers and learners are available. Searching such lists is made easier at:
<http://www.listz.com> .

This has a directory of over 90,000 lists.

The most widely known and used by teachers is *TESL-L*, the Teachers of English as a Second Language list, which has a large number list such as *TESLMW-L* for materials writers. An alternative to lists is accessing one of the 20,000 USENET Newsgroups on the Web where opinions or questions are 'posted' and responses read and commented upon.

Software for ELT on the Internet

Many web-sites contain files of ELT computer software which may be 'down-loaded' from the Internet onto your computer for classroom use. This is advertised in the form of either 'shareware' for which you are morally obliged to pay the requested fee, or 'freeware' for which there is no charge. The most useful for such CALL software is *CELIA* - an archive of software to ELT maintained by La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. It is available at:
<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/education/celia/celia.html>

The Aston LSU Web site contains valuable links to software providers, too. It is worth remembering that there is also the possibility of downloading 'viruses' which are programmes designed only to cause damage to a computer and software on it. Details on virus-scanning and anti-virus resources can be obtained from:
<http://www.hitchhikers.net/av.shtml>.

Learning Resources for ELT on the Web

Eastment (1996) notes: "The amount of purpose-written ELT material on the web is disappointingly small; resources that exist tend to be text-based and lacking in interactivity." Many such sites tend too often to have links to unmediated, authentic resources for example the UK newspaper, *The Guardian* (On-Line version)
<http://www.guardian.co.uk> .



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Resources for developing listening are even more scarce and require Real Player although writing is better served, in particular at sites such as Purdue University's *On-Line Writing Laboratory* (OWL).

Since Eastment's report, however, a number of ELT-specific or 'dedicated' sites have arrived on the Web. In Trotman (1998) I have provided details about ten such sites, while Trotman (1999) explores one, *Planet English*, in depth at: <http://www.planetenglish.com>.

Several on-line grammars exist but most are paper-based texts that have been placed on the Web. The Web is not yet so good for discovering dictionaries, though some do exist. Solutions to problems over copyright and charging need to be found first. One dictionary site of particular use is:

<http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard/diction.html>.

This holds access to 800 dictionaries in 150 different languages.

Magazines or 'Webzines' have featured on the Web since its inception and *Hotwired* regularly appears among lists of the most frequently visited web sites. Excellent sources for teachers include *The Internet TESL Journal* (monthly), with lesson plans and handouts as well as articles and research papers, and *TESL-EJ* which is a quarterly, refereed journal of high academic quality. For learners, the web site for the US News network CNN, provides sets of worksheets relating to that day's broadcast which can be quickly downloaded.

Other areas of Internet Technology available to ELT Resources not specifically designed for ELT include ICQ, Video-Conferencing and Real Audio / Real Video. ICQ is a freely-available live chat programme enabling users to select their chat partners from all over the world. Real Audio and Video allow the broadcast of streams of news-bulletins from live radio and recordings of news clips. The use of Video-Conferencing programmes such as 'Cu-See me' is also becoming increasingly possible; this involves the use of inexpensive cameras that enable classes, even in different continents, to observe or take part in each others' lessons in real time i.e. 'live'. This increases the possibilities of Virtual Schools such as NetLearn Languages at <http://www.nll.co.uk>.

Conclusion

Certain aspects of the Internet surveyed above have been adapted and implemented in ELT. Questions still remain, however. As further features of IT such as E-mail become

household items, can we expect to witness greater use of them in ELT? For the moment the vast number of unmediated sites and the low range of dedicated sites means that paper-based materials still reign supreme. However, the element of motivation that IT arouses ensures that many learners will continue to access the Internet and thus develop linguistically perhaps in spite of its only partial presence in schools. For the most part, the Internet is still there for teachers to explore and exploit more fully.

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