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USING THE WORLD WIDE WEB IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

By Nina O'Driscoll

Whether you are a training centre dedicated to the teaching of Business English, a school where Business English represents an increasingly important part of your activities, or a General English school offering business options, the Web has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of your courses.

This article deals with the practicalities of using the World Wide Web in Business English teaching, and goes on to consider the advantages of a school using its own Web site for teaching purposes.

Downloading Web resources

The Web provides Business English trainers with a powerful resource, allowing them access to a wealth of authentic, up-to-date company and business information.

Today, the majority of companies and business organisations have Web sites, and these can provide a wide variety of authentic resource material to support the preparation and delivery of Business English courses. For example:

- On-line newspapers provide company news and articles on current business and economic issues.
- Company Web sites provide information about their activities, markets, products or services, and even publish full Annual Reports.
- Professional associations offer sector and industry up-dates.
- On-line city guides provide useful information about attractions, facilities and travel tips for the business traveller.

Of course, this kind of business information is frequently available in printed form such as business magazines, company publicity material, and Annual Reports. However, it can take time to locate and gather such material and keep it current - it also requires considerable storage space.

The Web overcomes these limitations and has the potential for more immediate and easier access to an infinite range of business resources.

The benefits of Web resources

The following are some of the advantages of using Web sites to access information:

- The information is immediately available with no intermediary involved.
- Information is easily downloaded, and can be saved on disk, thus eliminating the need for space-intensive storage.
- The information is genuinely authentic and up-to-date and this helps to give courses business validity.
- The Web has a strong appeal to business people for whom it is now part of daily business life.
- Much of the information can be accessed at minimum cost.

In practice, trawling the Web for good quality business content can be notoriously frustrating. On-line searching with its tendency towards broken links and out-of-date sites can be painfully slow and can result in high phone bills. However, using *Search Engines* and *Business Information Gateways* can make searching much more efficient, as can the use of *off-line browsers* which allow complete Web pages, including their graphics, to be downloaded and accessed later at leisure, off-line.

Web resources for Business English

The available Business English resources on the Web



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have an important role to play at all stages of a course, from planning through to delivery:

Pre-course

- For trainers, the Web is a valuable tool for gathering background information on course participants' jobs and their business areas, before the start of their course. Web pages with relevant content can be printed, book-marked, or downloaded on an off-line browser, and the information used to inform planning decisions on course content.
- Access to this type of pre-course information is especially useful to teachers who are new to Business English training and who may feel apprehensive about their lack of business knowledge.
- Similarly, for schools using freelance staff, briefing information ensures the freelancer has essential background information about the school's key clients. This helps maintain a professional image and reputation for client service.
- The wealth of business information on the Web can be harnessed to provide schools with a bank of authentic resources to support all their Business English training. Searching can be precisely targeted at sites that contain information about their key clients' business situation. Relevant sites can be book-marked, and their addresses catalogued according to predetermined criteria. In this way, Web resources can be systematically organised to create an on-line bank of resources, which can be accessed at any time by the school's Business English teaching staff, and continuously updated to reflect the school's company client base.

Mid-course

- An obvious use of Web resources is to provide authentic reading material, which can be exploited in class and used in conjunction with specially-prepared worksheets.
- Similarly, content from sites with interesting business information can be used to develop relevant English language teaching material for

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activities such as comparing company products.

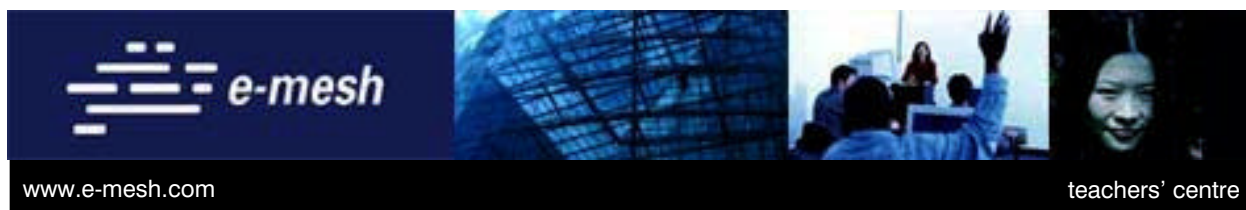
- Web sites can also be used as the basis for activities to develop specific business skills, e.g. presentations or report writing in English. At a recent BESIG workshop, one presenter (Duncan Baker) gave an interesting example of an Internet task for developing report-writing skills: students were required to use information from the Web sites of three oil companies to evaluate their potential for investors in the oil industry.
- Sites with city and country information can provide briefing information for students attending English courses prior to assignment abroad. For example, a student about to be sent to work in Tokyo could visit the Travel-net site at http://www.world-travel-net.co.uk/cities/tok_gen.htm where, for example, they could find information about banking and shopping hours, and see photographs showing transport, restaurants, and housing.

The school's own Web site: uploading learning support

The Web is clearly rich in resources which can be downloaded to support Business English training, but it also offers schools the opportunity to deliver other types of learning support via their own Web sites.

The school's Web site offers a powerful medium for delivering varied support for its business learners through:

- on-line testing
- needs analysis questionnaires to establish precise training needs
- interactive exercises and reference material to build up language skills which require a high degree of accuracy, e.g. grammar and vocabulary
- links to Web sites with content relevant to the users' professional interests
- e-mail to facilitate communication between participants and their trainers.



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Benefits for Business English training

Usually, busy professionals who need English for their jobs have limited time for studying. Their English language training is frequently restricted to one- or two-week intensive courses. For this type of student, access to additional language learning material on the Web, both prior to and after the course, is a powerful means of maximising the effectiveness of face-to-face training.

In summary, publishing Business English support material on the school's Web site can:

- result in more efficient and effective use of valuable course time
- support learning beyond the course
- foster on-going communication between trainers and participants before and after, and between courses
- offer business clients a higher level of customer support.

Types of Web-based learning support on the school's own Web site

When a school publishes learning support on its own Web site, it provides its students with useful additional support at all stages of their English language training, as well as providing a wider range of learning experiences:

Pre-course

- Needs analysis questionnaires are valuable for planning courses that precisely meet client and student training needs. On-line questionnaires can be automatically submitted to the school, saving time and cutting down on administrative procedures.

For participants who use English at work only from time to time, or whose English has become rusty, exposure to English before an intensive course can help to maximise the effectiveness of the first days of training. The Web provides an efficient way of

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delivering pre-course learning material that can be accessed at a place and time that suits the individual participant. Such support could include links to relevant reading material on the web, links to sites with listening material such as on-line radio, or interactive exercises to review basic grammar and vocabulary.

Mid-course

- For participants on extensive Business English courses, or following a business option where contact with the trainer is limited, e-mail can be a way of communicating with their tutor and other students, and submitting tasks for comment and correction.
- For participants who need to improve their writing skills for business, real-world e-mail tasks can provide added realism.

Post-course

The school's Web site enables the school to give on-going language support to students after their courses, or to those who are between courses. Publishing learning material can act as a powerful incentive to draw past students back to the site, thus keeping the name of the school to the forefront. It also indicates a readiness on the part of the school to provide on-going training support to its business clients. Some suggestions for post-course support include the following:

- Publishing reference material, e.g. phrases for the making phone calls could be useful for students who need a quick and easy way to refresh their English before making a vital telephone call.
- Using the Web site to deliver supplementary learning material to complement a school's courses. This could take the form of interactive exercises for building up language skills that require high levels of accuracy (e.g. grammar) as well as more open activities that could be submitted by e-mail.
- Developing complete distance learning modules that a school can offer as part of a complete training package.



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The way forward

The school Web site clearly provides a powerful platform to support the downloading of authentic content, central for the planning and preparing of relevant business courses, as well as the publishing of learning material to complement face-to-face training. For schools planning to develop their own Web site to include a dedicated Business English area, one solution is to contract out the development to Web designers, though they may lack a clear understanding of the requirements of a language learning environment. An alternative is to develop Web skills within the school. A number of tools now exist which make this possible, ranging from shareware, which can be downloaded from the Internet, to sophisticated multimedia web authoring packages. Tools like these come with wizards and templates that enable trainers to produce their own Web-based material, without having to acquire complex programming skills. Developing Web skills within the school means that the site can grow incrementally; materials can be regularly adapted and updated to reflect changing training situations.

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