

## INFORMATION AND THE INTERNET: WHAT EVERY LANGUAGE TEACHER SHOULD KNOW

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### 1. Introduction

The Internet is a vast resource which has in recent years contributed to the diffusion of an unprecedented volume of information. Its speed of delivery and ease of access, not to mention the range of topics that it deals with, have all played a part in its popularity both in the workplace where it is primarily used for professional information and contacts, and in the home where it is quickly becoming one of the world's favourite pastimes.

The language teaching profession is no outsider to the Internet; the array of teaching and reference sites available for consultation bear witness to this fact. However one of the most important contributions that the Internet has made to the foreign language classroom is found in the range of *realia* that is available online. Such authentic materials previously had to be collected during trips abroad or through other contact with the language in question, and were therefore much more limited in scope. The Internet is therefore not just a reference point, it is also a teaching and learning resource.

We will examine here two issues regarding the use of the Internet in the foreign language classroom: what the implications are of considering the Internet as a source of authentic teaching materials,

and how to go about exploiting such materials in the creation of language teaching modules.

## **2.0 The Internet as a source of teaching materials**

When the language that is used to present information is also the language being learned, the amount of learning that occurs is substantially increased. Not only is the student learning the language of study - s/he is also learning about something through that language. But this type of integrated approach to language learning does raise some important questions which relate directly to the materials being used: if the students are expected to learn about particular topics, then the texts selected must be authoritative and informationally accurate, and if they are to learn English, then the texts must also be appropriate for this function. In short, such an approach requires that teaching materials be rigorously selected so that they satisfy both the linguistic and informational needs of the student.

The main points to be discussed in this section are centred around definitions of information and knowledge acquisition, an overview of the types of sites to be found on the web, and some comments on the different kinds of linguistic features found in simplified (non-specialised) texts, and their relevance to language learning.

### *2.1 Information and disinformation*

The major advantage that the Internet has for teachers lies in the huge amount of material that it provides both directly, in the form of ready-made lessons, and indirectly, in the form of text, images and sound files that can be exploited in class. The main disadvantage associated with this enormous quantity of resources is of course locating that which is needed at any given time. But this is one of the least important problems that arise with regard to the Internet as a classroom resource.

When we use the Internet as a source of teaching materials, we are assuming that our pupils are not merely learning language skills, but that they should also be learning *about* something. This is because the primary function of language is to communicate ideas and not to exist independently of the communicative situation.

Language learning that is driven by the desire to learn about some subject external to grammar rules and vocabulary combinations is more likely to be successful, because it is the communicative function of language, not its structural nature, that is being emphasised. When students realise that they are able to understand the authentic text that they come across, they are in a position to appreciate their linguistic achievements for what they enable them to learn rather than as an end in themselves. This means that language learning takes on a practical significance in their learning, be it inside or outside of the classroom.

It is easy to be fooled into thinking that the presence of authentic material in the classroom must by definition imply a similar presence of information and facts. This is unfortunately not always the case. The Internet is characterised by its almost utopian democracy, but this comes at a price: free thought and free speech are considered to be fundamental human rights, but their presence causes as much controversy as their absence. The Internet is unpoliced, uncensored, unchecked; it is a place where the academic hobnobs happily with the proletarian, the ultra-conservative with the anarchic, the fundamentalist with the agnostic. Most school-age youngsters have an under-developed critical sense which often leads them to believe that any material that is in print, or otherwise publicly available, is factual and therefore true. As they are still minors, it becomes the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the material that s/he presents is reliable both in terms of the language used and the information that it contains.

The existence of erroneous, partial and/or and incomplete information on the Internet should not necessarily be viewed negatively: expressions of different points of view can be exploited well, for example in group discussions, where differing opinions can help to stimulate debate. But it should be borne in mind that in exercises which are to be committed to a more lasting medium, such as the textbook or the CD-ROM, accuracy of information becomes as necessary as accuracy of language.

## 2.2 *Types of sites on the Internet*

For the purposes of this discussion, sites will be classified into three main groups: private sites, commercial sites, and public and educational sites, although there is often a certain degree of overlap between categories. This examination brings to the fore the principal linguistic, informational and multimedial characteristics of the sites.

### 2.2.1 Private sites

Private sites are usually set up and maintained by individuals, and contain information about themselves and their passions. The range of topics found is bewildering and limitless, as well as being totally uncensored. These sites often contain a vast quantity of images and sound files (copyright permissions not necessarily having been granted), and are often very eye-catching. It is unfortunately the case that the textual content often lacks the same care and attention invested in the visual impact, both in terms of the quality of information and the language used to convey it.

There are a few *caveats* here for the school language teacher. The first is that links from these pages must be thoroughly checked, for reasons of security and suitability, before the site is offered to pupils online. Secondly, sites written in English have not necessarily been written by a native speaker, and therefore there may be errors and inaccuracies caused by this; or they may contain typographic errors or other oddities which will have to be accounted for. There is also the issue of content mentioned briefly above. None of these points need be problematic, but they do make prior checking of private sites necessary before they are used in the classroom.

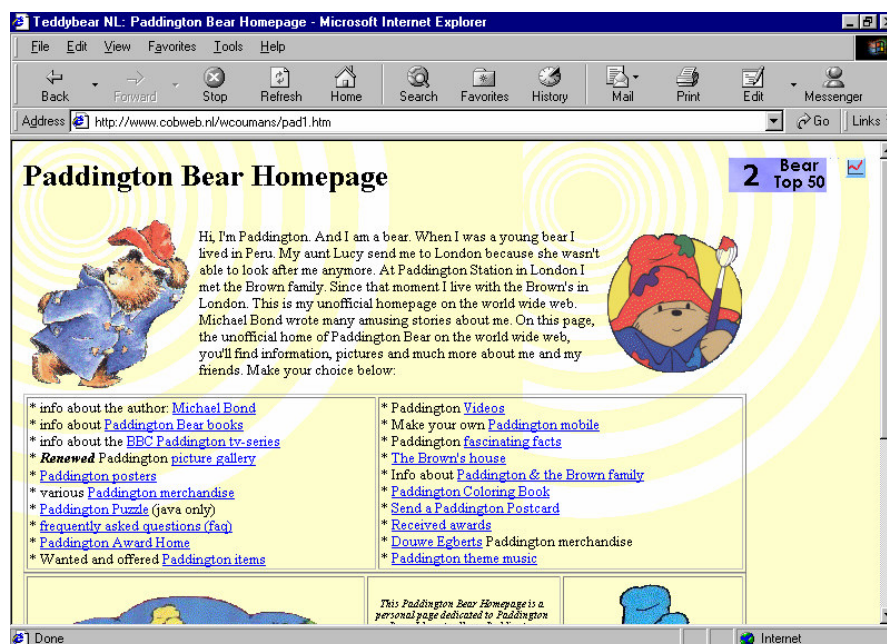


Figure 1  
Example of a private site

## 2.2.2 Commercial sites

The commercial sites genre is probably the largest single source of video clips, images and sound files. It is also the largest single source of suasive language and disinformation (what Orwell famously referred to as "untruths"): this combination of factors makes such sites both highly attractive and exceedingly suspicious. But there are many different kinds of commercial sites, promoting anything from global giants to local tradesmen, and they display different features accordingly. Those which take the most professional stance with regard to their visual impact and information content tend to be the big market-players who need to protect their brand from bad publicity as much as promote it further, and it is these sites which tend to be well-stocked with multimedia files. Very small, local businesses rarely have breathtaking graphics on their sites, but like the giants, they tend to be very concerned with the image that they are projecting towards potential customers; as such, they are often both linguistically and visually unsophisticated, but have other merits for the language teacher (for example, short texts, concise information). Less scrupulous commercial and for-profit sites need to be carefully selected if they are to be used in class, both for the links that appear on their pages, and for and other unsuitable content or references. Again, it is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that the students are not exposed to inappropriate material.

Although ideal for module creation, it should be remembered that the multimedia files available on these sites will be subject to strict copyright legislation, usually requiring substantial fees to be paid for their use outside the owner's site. It is very important not to use such material without permission, especially if it is to be re-used and made available on the Internet. For this reason, it may be more practical to use film and record company sites on-line. As far as the language content of commercial sites is concerned, linguistic errors are quite rare, and the texts often contain interesting features such as hyperbole, superlatives, and "loaded" language, which are perhaps more safely exploited in the form of paper print-outs in class.



Figure 2  
Example of a commercial site

### 2.2.3 Public and educational sites

Public information is generally provided by government or by specifically appointed bodies. The Internet sites that they manage deal with aspects of legislation, health and public services, as well as tourism, entertainment and leisure, to name but a few. Educational sites include government and other research centres, higher educational institutions, as also less rigorously academic sites intended for schools and adult education. These sites can be said to be the most useful of all to the language teacher: they are informationally accurate and informative, and the quality of the language encountered is arguably the highest in the world of Internet. But there are other practical considerations which confirm their usefulness in the clas-

sroom. The first of these is that most of the information to be found on these sites is considered to be already in the public domain. This means that the content has been approved before being made public and thus is accurate, and so lends itself very well to the kind of integrative language learning that was discussed in 2.0. It is also generally the case that material which is in the public domain can be used free of charge for educational purposes<sup>1</sup>, therefore these sites can provide fertile ground for teachers who wish to adopt, adapt, or summarise texts for class exercises. A further advantage to be found in these sites is that links from them tend to be internal or in any case vetted, and they can therefore be considered safe territory for pupils.



Figure 3  
Example of a public educational site

## 2.2.4 Summary

We have seen that sites can be very crudely divided up by type and function. The most important consideration of all is that not only the site itself but also its links have to be checked through before being presented to a class. It should be mentioned that commercial and personal sites are not necessarily bad; on the contrary, they are

<sup>1</sup> It is usual for copyright material to be clearly marked as such.

often excellent. The pictures painted above focus on a “worst-case” scenario which fortunately is not always found in practice. However it is important to be aware of the pitfalls that can arise, so that they can be avoided.

### 2.3 *Language variety*

Thus far we have discussed language only in terms of accuracy, but language is not dependent on accuracy alone for its effectiveness. There is another consideration that teachers of English should take into account when using the Internet as a teaching resource: degrees of authenticity. Language is often simplified to aid understanding for various target readers, and this affects the naturalness of the text. If students are constantly exposed to unusual-sounding language, they will encounter great difficulty in acquiring natural-sounding language. An overview of some types of simplification which can occur is given in the following paragraphs, and is based on observation of the phenomena in situ.

#### 2.3.1 Sites for children

The language found in sites for children who are native speakers of the language tends to be characterised by its restricted vocabulary and by pictorial illustrations. The kind of language found in these sites is not necessarily more simple for non-native speakers of the language, however, because the simplification is based on criteria which are relevant to the native speaker, whose needs are different from those of the non-native speaker. Native speakers acquire the grammar of their language early on in their linguistic development and spend the rest of their lives increasing their vocabulary. Learners, on the other hand, tend to acquire grammar systematically, and quite slowly, whereas their lexical knowledge is more quickly increased, often thanks to similarities with their first language. The “simplified” language that can be found in children’s sites is therefore more grammatically rich than it would be in learners’ sites, making the language deceptively complex.



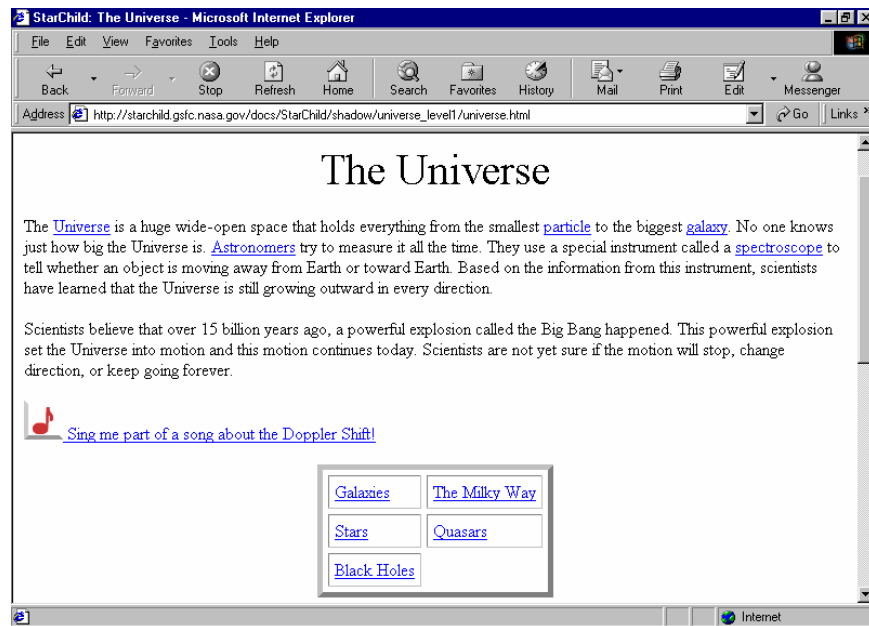


Figure 4  
Simplified language for children

### 2.3.2 Sites for foreign learners

Sites for foreign learners are often arranged by level (elementary, intermediate, advanced), according to a number of grammatical points that are fairly strictly adhered to by language teaching professionals. This means that texts are produced to cater for these levels, and rarely cause any difficulty to the learner. However, an over-zealous preoccupation with grammar in language teaching often means that texts written for teaching purposes have an artificial air about them. This can be manifested in many ways, including for example the use of inappropriate terminology for a given register, uncommon collocations, deliberate avoidance or inclusion of grammatical items. This situation has improved greatly, and the Internet would appear to be less infested with artificiality than text books are, but if the English to be studied on the Internet is to be authentic, care should be taken when using these sites. On the other hand, there is a vast array of language games available which can be happily taken advantage of in class.

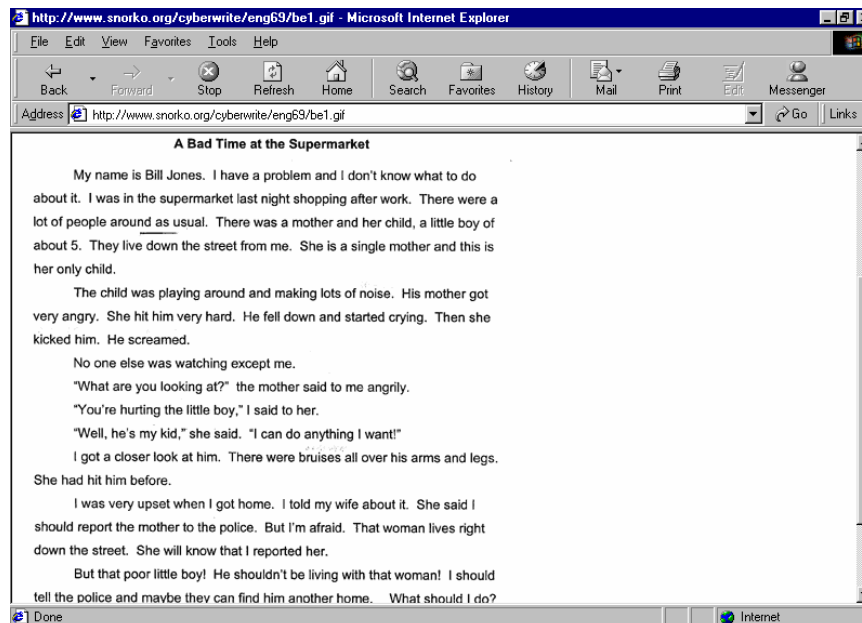


Figure 5

Simplified language for learners of English

### 2.3.3 Non-specialised sites for adults

The language in these sites is not so much simplified as de-specified, as the information is not presented in any specific textual genre. The information presented is usually of general interest (for example, popular science or history) and the language used is characterised by simple constructions (an avoidance of both multi-clause sentences and polysyllabic words) and a lack of ambiguous or technical terms, making them suitable for a wide age-group, ranging from mature adults to high school pupils. The information density is quite low, meaning that the content words are well-spaced out with function words, allowing information to be assimilated with more ease, but without compromising on the overall information content. Such general-audience sites are most useful to the language teacher for use both directly in class and in the preparation of teaching materials.

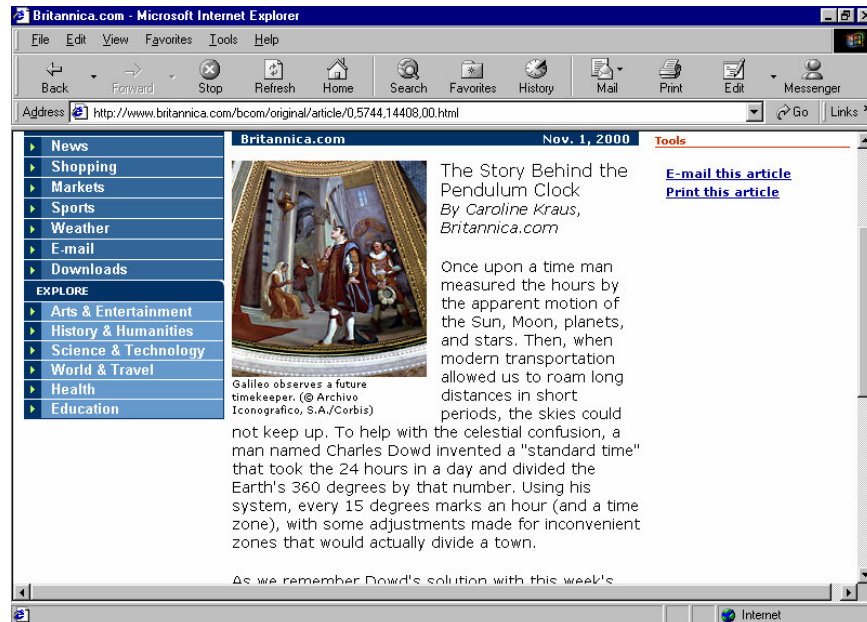


Figure 6  
Simplified (non-technical) language for adults

### 2.4 Summary

The topics discussed above are considerations which should be kept in mind when using the Internet for teaching materials: there are no hard-and-fast rules to be obeyed. The important point is that the teacher must learn to strike a balance between the linguistic and information content, both in terms of accuracy and suitability.

## 3.0 Planning multimedia modules

In this section we discuss the creation of multimedia modules for foreign language learning in the schools. Having already looked at what the Internet has to offer, we turn to look at what computer presentation can help us to achieve.

### 3.1 General considerations

It is all too easy to be swept along by the enthusiasm for computers in the classroom, but it is important to remember that the computer is just another tool that teachers use; no more, no less. In objective terms, it is no more special than the blackboard or the cassette recorder in that it too fills a specific niche in the teaching process. The main problem that is associated with using computers in the classroom is that many teachers feel overwhelmed by the technology and thus avoid confrontation with it. However it is worth noting that if we are to successfully avoid becoming slaves to technology, we must learn to master it, and assign it a place in our lessons and preparation.

### *3.2 Multimedia modules*

Multimedia modules are not better than traditional teaching methods, and they cannot substitute them entirely. However they do offer considerable advantages both to the student and the teacher. The student receives individual attention, is not tied to the pace of the other students in the class, and can choose exercises that interest him/her. The teacher has the considerable benefit of automatic correction facilities, as well as being able to tailor-make modules for individual classes rather than be obliged to use ready-made materials. The possibilities for personalisation are virtually limitless, and the teacher who caters for his/her students' interests also increases those students' motivation to learn.

Internet technology in the classroom is still in its infancy. Although "raw" Internet use, such as web quests, treasure hunts, and other occasions where the materials found are not elaborated, is fairly commonplace in the wired classroom, those who would like to develop their own multimedia material find that there are very few guidelines available. To remedy this, the most important considerations will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

#### 3.2.1 Use what you have

Most teachers have a supply of materials that they have prepared over time, and there is no reason whatsoever to assume that these materials cannot be adapted for use on the computer. Many paper exercises can actually be enhanced when transferred to electronic media, especially if they include audio and visual elements. As a further note, it is also true that it takes very little time to transform existing exercises into computer-readable format, whereas the creation of exercises (whether they be paper or electronic) is a much more lengthy process. It is therefore worth reusing materials that have proved themselves to be effective in the past, rather than start from scratch.

#### 3.2.2 Record what you find

One of the most frustrating aspects of the Internet is that of relocating pages. This can be easily resolved by keeping an address book of Internet pages, where not only the address, but also some notes

about the page content can be noted. This address book can be paper or electronic (there are several freeware and shareware programs available for this purpose). An alternative is to copy files, and store them for future use. This is especially useful for images and audio files, but depends on a computer which has a very large memory. Both note-taking and copying files saves a great deal of time and effort, and, most importantly of all, avoids the problem of relocation.

### 3.2.3 Exploit multimedia files

The “bottom-up” creation of multimedia modules is often more effective than the “top-down” approach. By this it is intended that if a module is planned around a good audio, video or image file, it will be more focused and coherent than a module which consists of a series of text exercises which require “jazzing up” with multimedia elements. Multimedia files should never be considered to be “added extras” in multimedia modules; they are an integral, and often fundamental, part of them. The main reason for advocating the “bottom-up” approach is a practical one. It is often very difficult to find suitable multimedia files for a series of texts from which exercises have been prepared, especially if more than one such file needs to be found. If the multimedia item is used as the basis of an exercise, or series of exercises, the potentially fruitless search for appropriate images or audios is avoided.

### 3.2.4 Take advantage of the technology

The computer should be viewed as a labour-saving device, making it possible to copy, edit, elaborate and reduce texts with the minimum of effort. Single texts can be exploited in different ways, using a series of varying formats, thus making repetition possible while steering clear of the element of boredom that it often entails. For example, a text can be used in a gap-fill exercise, then summarised to provide the material for a text-manipulation exercise such as a sentence shuffler, then elements from the text can be brought into focus for a vocabulary exercise, and so on. When repetition is done in this way, it appears more varied, and it is easier, and arguably more effective, for us to present our students with such exercises on a computer than it is on paper.

### 3.2.5 Know when not to use the computer

This is the most important point of all. If an exercise will not be improved or enhanced by computer presentation, or indeed if it is easier to do on paper, the computer should be kept switched off. Sometimes low-tech is more appropriate for a task than high-tech is, and we should not allow ourselves to be blinded by the new. As we mentioned above, the computer is simply one of many classroom tools, and should not be used just for the sake of using it.

### 3.3 Summary

To sum up, multimedia modules are more easily created around multimedia files for which suitable text is subsequently located, than from an existing idea or text for which the multimedia elements have to be found. This is the reverse of the approach that is typically used in preparing traditional, pen-and-paper materials. It requires a fair degree of opportunism and serendipity, but provides a degree of freedom that is otherwise uncommon.

## 4.0 conclusion

We have seen that the Internet is a virtual land of plenty, but one where the quantity and quality of its content can be overwhelming. As with any other information source, it requires judicious use, especially when the user is acting on behalf of minors. But it is not the “big bad wolf” that it is often accused of being, and has already revolutionised all spheres of modern life, not least education.

The language teaching profession has been exceptionally fortunate to have discovered the Internet, because the range of authentic materials that can be found there is far greater than anything that could have been imagined a couple of decades ago. It is now possible for teachers and learners to discover language, culture and information in the widest sense at the click of a mouse. This gives an immediateness and relevancy to the language learning process that can be only beneficial in a world where languages and the acceptance of other cultures are becoming increasingly important.