Using the Internet in EFL Classes:
Ideas for Using E-mail and WWW

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INTRODUCTION

I started using the Internet in one of the courses I teach about three years ago. The main motivation for starting to use it was that I wanted to give my students opportunities to communicate with people out of classrooms in English and be exposed to a wider range of culture. Having taught the course using the Internet, I discovered that there are many good reasons for applying the technology to English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. Those reasons are: it encourages authentic communication; it provides authentic materials; it promotes cultural awareness; it motivates learners; it generates creative learning activities; it improves teacher-student interaction and class management; it also promotes individualized learning, collaborative skills and thinking skills.

There are a variety of possible ways to use the Internet in the language classroom. Some of the typical activities are surfing the Web, using e-mail, using discussion groups, and creating Web pages. I describe the four main types of Internet activities used in EFL settings. The main purpose of this paper is to introduce activities and projects which I have tried and found useful in a program for elementary-level EFL students and give suggestions for teachers who wish to put those into practice. The activities reported here involved two groups of non-English majors at a junior college in Japan. One is the group of twenty students who attended the course from April, 1995 to March, 1997; the other is the group of twelve freshmen at the same college who have been participating in the course since April, 1997.

WEB SURFING

The Internet World Wide Web (usually called WWW or the Web) can offer a world of vast amount of information available to anyone at the touch of a button through a Web browser (software to navigate the Web). It does not take much time to teach students how to use the browser and its basic function buttons such as “Back,” “Forward,” “Open” and
"Stop." When teaching these functions, it is a good idea to use Web pages on the local area network because users often have to wait a long time for a page to appear on the screen after clicking on a link or entering a URL (Uniform Resource Locator, or Web address). My students often complained of the speed to open new pages. Then I set up my own pages for the class to post class schedules, announcements, a list of starting links for students, my personal information, and so on, and let them use these pages for their practice of Web surfing.

The teacher could reinforce the orientation by having students visit another Web site in which pages are written in simple sentences with a few graphics and images (e.g., White House for Kids) and answer easy comprehension questions. In order to complete the task, students skim and scan the text, move the pages back and forth, and click on text and image links. (These teaching ideas originally come from Muehleisen [1997] and Yamauchi [1996].)

After students become familiar with the browser, the teacher can introduce search engines (e.g., Yahoo). Using search engines is an important skill, but it can be confusing for those who are unfamiliar with them. After demonstrating how to find sites which offer the information to look for, the teacher should provide students some follow-up assignments to practice their search skills. For example, teachers could give a communicative task like this one:

You are planning to go to Hawaii on vacation. You haven’t made a hotel reservation yet. You would like to stay in a hotel near Waikiki Beach, where hopefully you can get a nice view of the beach. You are a student and you don’t want to spend much money on accommodation. Find sites which offer hotel information in Hawaii and see if there are any hotels you might want to stay at.

This kind of practice seems to help students learn the idea of using the Web and search engines for information, and also encourage them to use them more often and undertake more complex research projects.

**USING E-MAIL**

Electronic mail (usually called e-mail) is probably the most frequently used feature of the Internet for many users. E-mail activities can be done in various formats: communication between teacher and student, student and student, and student and “keypal” (penpal via the Internet).

**Teacher-Student E-mail**

In the initial stage of using e-mail, teachers should use the technique of e-mail dialoging between the teacher and students. First they teach the basics of e-mail software: how to read, send, reply, print, delete, and store messages. Then the teacher tells the students that they must visit the computer lab and check their e-mail boxes regularly (maybe twice a day).
Since then, when the students log in the computer everyday, one or two new messages from
the teacher await them. The messages could be announcements for a next class session,
homework assignments to be read, or personal correspondence to individuals with a question
(e.g., “Hi. How was your weekend? My weekend was great. I did ... What about
yours?”). The students have to read the message and then either reply to the message or do
the assignment. The teacher's role is to respond back immediately to the students' replies
with another follow-up question. (This idea comes from Belisle [1996].)

In a series of these activities, students not only practice using the e-mail software, but
also learn what e-mail messages should look like. Teachers should not correct errors of
students' writing in the activity. Instead, they should encourage students to write more
without worrying about making mistakes. When they have to correct an error, teachers
could do so by modeling correct syntax or usage in their replies to what students have written,
in hoping that the students will pick it up through reading the teacher messages and
composing their replies. It is almost always the teacher who initiates topics and gives
prompts in dialoging, but gradually students start initiating a new topic as they become more
confident in using e-mail and in communicating in the target language.

Student-Student E-mail

After one or two weeks of e-mail correspondence with the teacher, students could write
with another student in class. In student-student dialoging, the teacher should encourage
(or assign) them to write to a classmate who they don't know very well. The teacher may
either control over topics or let students write about anything they desire, but the teacher
should monitor to make sure that their exchanges keep going. If any trouble noticed, the
teacher should suggest some topics to the pair. (This idea comes from Stewart [1996].)

In my opinion, for the purpose of letting students practice how to communicate via e-
mail, the teacher-student activity is definitely more effective than the student-student one,
but it does put more responsibilities on the teacher. Both types of the e-mail activities
increase teachers' tasks to some extent and may be difficult to carry out with larger classes of
twelve students or more. However, I strongly feel that they are worth doing. In these
activities my students started to take e-mail as an important medium of communication and
adopted a habit of checking their e-mail boxes regularly. Some students of the 1997 group
remarked that the teacher-student e-mail corresponding was a good warm-up activity before
they began writing with foreign correspondents. As for the teacher, I became familiar with
students' writing abilities and interests in exchanges of messages, which helped me plan
other activities. Furthermore, having private exchanges among one another on such topics
as family, hobbies, school life, the movies they saw, and happenings in their lives, the
students and I could build good foundations of class as a “team.” I felt the team-building was
extremely important when the class carried out collaborative Internet projects in future
stages.

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Student-Keypal E-mail

Once students become familiar with using e-mail and comfortable in reading and composing messages in English, they are ready to start corresponding with someone out of class (abroad, preferably) who speak or study the target language. Teachers may find an individual penpal for each student, or match their class with another class which shares similar course outlines, goals, class size and school calendar. Finding a partner class rather than individual penpals might be better if the teachers want to monitor what their students are doing or have all students write around a certain theme or topic. If it is difficult to find partners for their classes or students, there are several places on the Internet where teachers can find keypals. (For this purpose, I recommend *Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections and Exchange Penpals*).

If teachers introduce the overseas keypal as part of the course work, they should require students to keep carbon copies of correspondences or have them report the teacher or the class regularly what they have learned through their e-mail exchanges. Also I suggest that the teacher should have short-term correspondence with keypals before they start writing with students. By doing so, teachers can explain the keypals the objectives of e-mail exchanges for their courses, the language level of their students, length and frequency of exchanges planned, appropriate message length and language usage, what should (or should not) be discussed, how students' errors should be taken care of, whether messages may be written in the students' first language, and so on. I did not do this kind of correspondence with the keypals for the 1995 group. I am not sure whether it does or does not account, but the 1995 students did not exchange keypal letters very often and some did not keep up correspondence in the second year of the course. As Stewart (1996) mentions, it is sometimes difficult to find reliable keypals and teachers have no control over individuals outside of their own institutions. Correspondence between the teacher and keypals will probably avoid possible problems and ensure helpful feedback and support from the keypals.

The first prompt in the keypal project is usually telling students to write messages introducing themselves to their keypals. Teachers should direct students to include one or two questions so that their messages are more likely to be replied by keypals. The students usually become excited and elaborate their messages on the computer. They ask the teacher to read what they have written and the teacher provides them support until they feel their messages are ready to send out. One student wrote in her first letter to the keypal:

Hello, Matt. My name is XXXX XXXX. I love baseball. When I was high school student I was baseball manager. I often watch pro baseball game on TV. I especially like "Seibe Lions". "Seibe Lions" is a pro baseball team in Japan. I want to go to watch a pro baseball game in the summer vacation. Do you know "Hideo Nomo"? What kind of sports do you like? See you again.

After a few exchanges a flow of friendly communication between the students and keypals seems to be built without further directions; however, as the regular exchanges of
messages increase, the novelty of telecommunication starts to wear off. Some students may gradually lose curiosity about unfocused exchanges of keypal letters. Others may claim that they don’t have any more topics to discuss with their keypals. Once this is observed, the teacher should further their e-mail activities from relatively free, unfocused exchanges between two persons, to more systematic exchanges on chosen topics, possibly with more people in greater areas of network.

USING DISCUSSION GROUPS

Having corresponded with foreign penpals, students are more confident and fluent in using e-mail and communicating in English than the time when they started. Then the teacher may recommend them on-line forums or discussion groups. There are three types of on-line discussion groups: mailing lists, newsgroups and Web discussion boards. Joining some of these groups, students can “speak” by computer keyboard among larger number of people from all over the world on the topic of their interests. EFL students can choose a discussion group to join from a variety of mailing lists and newsgroups. However, it is recommended, especially for lower-level students, to join groups which are specially created for students learning English (e.g., the SL Student Lists and ESL Discussion Center).

Public discussion in a large group is somewhat different from dialoguing with a single person via e-mail. The teacher must inform students of the differences and give enough guidance to teach how to use the discussion group and the “netiquette” (rules of electronic communication in the group). Another important aspect of on-line discussion is that “faceless communication brings out the worst in people” (Carrier, 1997, p. 287). Sometimes students may see or receive a rude or hostile message (posted intentionally or unintentionally). It may come across to them as unfriendly and they could avoid using the discussion group. A few of my students commented that they became hesitant to post their messages to one newsgroup I recommended when they read some aggressive news in the group. In such cases teachers could direct students to just ignore those aggressive users, but they should not probably force the students to join the discussion group.

In my class I had the students signed on the SL Student Lists after having corresponded with their first foreign penpals for about a month. I first let them just “lurk” (join and read messages posted by other participants without posting their own) for a few days and report what they found interesting. I also advised them to read only the messages which seemed interesting for them by looking at the subject lines, rather than trying to read all of them (because more than ten messages kept coming from the list). Then I had them add their messages to the list. I suggested that they should send a message by responding to someone else’s at first, rather than posting a message on a new topic (because following up other people’s messages is easier and also it encourages more active discussion on the whole list). Having students subscribe a list and telling them to talk with people without any objectives, however, did not create a functional learning environment. The students remarked they soon became overwhelmed with the volume of messages which arrived from the list and ceased to read the messages.

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Carrier (1997) states that language students may benefit more from a structured approach and teacher-led activities for using newsgroups, and I consider the same approach will be effective in using other kinds of on-line discussion groups such as mailing lists. For this reason I experimented a small cultural research project with the 1997 group. The goal of the project was to conduct country-comparison surveys of various cultural aspects by using discussion groups and report findings to the class.

In this project I gave structured guidance and step-by-step directions to ensure that the students focus carefully. First, I explained the goal and objectives of the survey project and gave a list of possible topics they could research. The students chose broad topics and then narrowed down aspects of the cultural topics they especially wanted to find out. I spent some time with each student to guide her effectively to an appropriate topic and find available Internet resources on the particular topic she was interested in. It was because some students picked topics which were likely to be of no interest to people out of Japan and their research could have led to unsatisfactory results. The topics my students chose were varied, from "Marriage" to "Fast Food in the World."

As soon as they decided on their topics, the students composed messages to post to relevant discussion groups. I told them that their messages had to include the two things: a set of questions to ask people about the topic; some kind of explanation or personal opinion to inform people who would read the message about related topics in our own culture. The following is a message written by a student who surveyed "Working Part-Time":

Hello. I'm XXXX XXXX. I have a mini project in my seminar. I'd like to investigate about part-time job in the world. I hope that many students will answer my questions. Please help me.

I work part-time at a wedding reception hall. I help wedding ceremony. I get 800 yen (about $7) an hour. I work there once a week and I earn about 20,000 yen (about $182) a month. I get an allowance of 7,000 yen (about $64) from my parents a month, too. Could you tell me about you? (name, age, hometown, sex)

Do you work part-time?
What kind of part-time job do you have?
How many days a week do you work?
Why do you work part-time?
How much do you earn a month?
What do you use the money for?
Do you get an allowance from your parents? (How much?)
What time do your classes usually finish?
Are high school students allowed to work part-time in your country? (In Japan, students aren't allowed to work part-time in most regular high schools.)
Thank you. Bye.

The students sent their survey messages to two or three of these discussion groups: the SL Student Lists, IECC-Surveys, fj.life.in-japan, and relevant Web boards of the ESL
Discussion Center: They also sent the messages to their keypals by e-mail. After sending out their survey questions, the students read and visited the discussion groups where they posted their messages regularly for about two weeks to collect data. The students received about fifteen replies in average (twenty-four the most, and seven the least) to their survey questions. I encouraged them to write back to the people who replied and ask follow-up questions if necessary. In the final stage of the project the students organized the information they gained to summarize their findings. Their final outputs (oral presentation and written report in Japanese) were quite interesting and generated a lot of questions and comments in class.

In terms of encouraging students to use discussion groups, this survey project was useful to some extent. When I introduced the SL Student Lists in the 1997 class, I recommended it as another good learning opportunity and simply advised the students to read and send messages. I expected they would actively take part in the discussion with other international students since they had enjoyed corresponding with their first foreign penpals. On the contrary to my expectation, the students' participation in the list discussion was very low. There were only five postings submitted to the list by my students (three students posted one message each, and one student posted two) in the first week after I introduced the list, and no postings after the first week.

In the cultural research project which we tried after the non-directed activity, the students' participation increased. All the students posted their survey messages at least once to some (or all) of the discussion groups already mentioned, and there were thirteen postings in total sent to the SL Student Lists alone. However, it should be mentioned that the students' use of the SL Student Lists and other discussion groups were limited in some sense. Although almost all of my students' postings for the survey project were replied by some other participants on the SL Student Lists, none of the topics they initiated were developed any further in the list discussion. Instead, the students chose to discuss the topics for more information via e-mail with the individuals who answered their questions. One of the students reported that she exchanged about fifty e-mail messages with her respondents. It seems that students feel more comfortable and encouraged when writing to an individual on a student-chosen or agreed topic and receiving immediate feedback about what they said, than when writing with a large group of "unknown" people. There might be some psychological or linguistic factors to be analyzed which differ penpal exchanges from group discussions.

CREATING WEB PAGES

Teachers who have used the Internet in their teaching often think of creating a Web site for their classes, but some feel afraid to try it because of little experience or exposure to the Internet. In spite of their fear, making Web pages is not as difficult as it may look. With a word-processing software or a text editor, a browser, and a little basic knowledge of HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), you can produce your own pages. The teacher can teach students the basics of page design and have them create a personal page, too. If teachers do
not intend to spend much time on teaching HTML, they could make and distribute sample HTML files beforehand and let students edit the files to produce their own pages, which can be done in one or two lessons. Even though their pages look plain without fancy multimedia productions, still, those pages are faster to load on computer and they can be very useful and effective tools for learning and teaching.

Making Web pages is an interactive activity as students anticipate the needs and interests of their audience, and it could lead to more interactive activities. My students of the 1997 group have their own English homepages in which they introduce themselves and talk about their hobbies and future dreams. Soon after they completed their homepages, they received e-mail letters from people who viewed their pages to ask questions or send comments, and then they responded to the viewers.

Having their own Web pages means that users can express themselves to a wider audience. Teachers can “publish” pieces of students’ traditional class writing assignments for people all over the world on the net. For instance, the results of my students’ surveys mentioned earlier have been added in our Web site so that all the people who participated in the surveys can visit and see. This motivates students greatly and increases the amount of efforts they direct at learning and producing their written work.

Another good thing is that creating Web pages generates other interesting learning activities in which various skills are integrated. For instance, if the class plan to make a Web site for people who are interested in Japanese culture, the teacher and students have to organize the project and decide on things such as a theme or topics and page layout. They may visit sites made by others on similar topics before making the decisions. They could also interview friends or e-mail keypals to ask for suggestions. After the theme is settled, they can collect and read necessary information by searching the Web and using discussion lists. Of course the students have to write something for their pages (e.g., essay, story, poem, research paper, caption for picture, etc.). When the pages are completed, they can write letters to their friends and relevant discussion lists to announce the new Web site. These ideas are just a few possibilities. With creativity of teachers and students, hundreds of activities can be developed.

My Internet classes made electronic newsletters called “HELLO,” which are available in our Web site. In the project each student chose a topic and wrote a short story to publish in the newsletter. The sequence of classroom writing itself followed the common pattern: selection of topic; preparation for writing and prewriting activities; writing; rewriting, editing and proofreading. Besides these writing activities, many students willingly used the Web and search engines for necessary information and a few used discussion groups in the process of their writing. These students reported that they did not use the Web very often for other purposes. One student who wrote about school cafeteria asked her Canadian keypal about the cafeteria food in Canada, and she included his opinions in her story. These desirable extra-activities made the writing project a fruitful one.
CONCLUSION

I have discussed the use of the Internet in foreign language instruction and introduced computer-mediated communicative activities which I used for elementary-level college English classes. In the years of trial and error, I found the motivational drawing power of the Internet was immense and it opened the opportunity for using English in realistic ways. However, I also learned the mere presence of the computer network did not necessarily create a satisfactory educational environment. Students need a series of purposeful activities which arose their interests. Sometimes those activities have to be structuring in order to ensure the students’ continual use of Internet features and engagement in interaction on the network. On this point lie two urgent needs for empirical research. One is to investigate how the typically-used Internet activities (e.g., international keypal, discussion groups) can be improved to facilitate instructed language acquisition. The other is to develop systematic criteria for analyzing whether the activities are likely to meet certain goals of communicative language instruction, as well as whether they are likely to be successful with students at different levels of language and computer skills.

Continuing advances of technology will make cross-cultural activities more economically and technically feasible in the future. The Internet will bring the extensive educational benefit into more classrooms and there will be a wider range of ways to make use of it for language learning and teaching. However, technology cannot take over the language classroom and teachers must always make informed decisions on how the Internet should be integrated into their classes. Although I have explained a range of activities using the Internet, teachers who wish to try them do not have to implement all of these activities with one class. I hope that the teachers will use some of the ideas here with their classes, and maybe arrange those so that they best suit their pedagogical goals and language curriculum.

NOTES

You can see some of the activities and projects I introduced in this paper at <http://www.tokujo.ac.jp/Tanaka>. For more information, e-mail to <tanaka@tokujo.ac.jp>.

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INTERNET RESOURCES CITED

- **ESL Discussion Center** at [http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion](http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion) includes discussion boards on current events, food, holidays, learning English, movies, and music.

- **Exchange Penpals** at [http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/exchange](http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/exchange) is a place where you can search for a penpal from listings of individuals, by entering such information as age, nationality, hobby, and so on. You can add yourself to the listing, too.

- **fj.life.in-japan** is a newsgroup for those who are interested in exchanging information about living in Japan. “fj” stands for “from Japan.” Users of the newsgroup is a mixture of Japanese and non-Japanese speakers and news are written in English and Japanese.

- **IECC-SURVEYS** is a mailing list where students (and teachers) can post requests for assistance on short-term projects, surveys, and questionnaires. To subscribe, send the command “subscribe” to <iecc-surveys-request@stolaf.edu>

- **Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections (IECC)** at [http://www.stolaf.edu/network/iecc](http://www.stolaf.edu/network/iecc) provides well-organized services for intercultural education and is probably the best site to find partner classes for keypal exchange and other Internet projects. The IECC mailing lists include “IECC” (for k-12), “IECC-HE” (for higher education), “IECC-PROJECTS,” “IECC-SURVEYS,” and “IECC-DISCUSSION.” You can get more information about these services by writing to <cdr@stolaf.edu>

- **SL Student Lists** at [http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/education/sl/sl.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/education/sl/sl.html) includes series of topically-based discussion lists for English language students to practice writing. To get more information about the lists and register your class, write to <trobb@cc.kyoto-su.ac.jp>


- **Yahoo** at [http://www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) is one of the oldest and widely-used search engines. A collection of Web sites are organized into hundreds of categories and updated daily.

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