1.0 Introduction

According to one authority, “Perhaps no single area of applied linguistics has seen such explosive growth over the past 15 years as computer-assisted instruction” (Chapelle, 2001, p.xiii). Within the last few years in particular, the ubiquity of the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW)-based technologies has made it possible for more and more teachers to introduce computer assisted language learning (CALL) activities into their classrooms. Of course, this process has been greatly aided by the fact that most students are now comfortable with using computers for writing papers, sending e-mail, and surfing the Web, if not specifically for language learning. Many traditional language learning activities—quizzes, for example—can simply be transferred to the Internet, however. “While the WWW has proved an effective medium for the dissemination of flexible learning materials, it has so far lacked the capacity to support the complex human interactions and richness of the classroom learning experience” (Hewson & Hughes, 2001, p.76). This paper describes the writer’s attempts to design and implement dynamic, interactive English learning homepages that would complement his classroom teaching and also try to replicate, if only to a small degree, the above described “richness” of the language learning experience.

2.0 Online writing classes

2.1 Description of Paragraph Writing class homepage at Shibaura Institute of Technology

The initial decision to use the university’s computer room for this class was taken based on the evidence that student attitudes and motivation are improved when computers are used for the teaching of second language writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). In addition to providing form-focused activities, it was felt that students needed to have opportunities to build their
fluency and confidence. Journal writing often provides such opportunities in the traditional classroom, and this pen and paper activity was simply transferred to the online environment, with the further introduction of a collaborative element. This online forum allowed students to start discussion topics and also to reply to topics that had been suggested by other members of the class. Figure 1 shows the main page of the forum.

**Figure 1. Main page of the collaborative online writing journal**

Students had to start at least five new topics and post at least thirteen replies, but aside from these requirements the activity was entirely free in that students were allowed to select their own topics and decide the length and level of detail of their posts. The topics selected by the students fell within a fairly narrow range of choices, and tended to be related to students' immediate interests and concerns. Typical examples are shown in Figure 1, and include hobby, sports, and part-time job. The teacher's hope was that students would take up some of the topics that they were writing about in
their compositions, which were often related to current affairs, and use the online journal as a forum for exploring these topics in a more informal fashion. However, with one or two exceptions such topics did not prove to be popular choices, indicating that when the focus is on fluency, perhaps students prefer to write on themes that are well within their capabilities, that is, themes on which they know that they can comfortably express themselves in English. This phenomenon may be due to the nature of the forum: words which are written in an online space can be read not only by students’ classmates and peers but by anyone who has access to the Internet. Students, understandably perhaps, may not be willing to take risks with their writing in such an environment.

Figure 2. An example of a topic thread from the online journal

Figure 2 shows one example of a topic thread from the online forum. The topic in this case was part-time jobs. Several interesting features of the discourse can immediately be noticed. First, individual messages tend to be
short. In this topic thread the maximum number of sentences in any single message is four. Perhaps the collaborative nature of the journal encourages an abbreviated question and answer format, rather than any kind of discursive writing. Alternatively, the shortness of the messages may be a typical characteristic of the kinds of communication that take place in cyberspace. Second, it can be seen fairly clearly that students are less conscious of attending to form. Simple grammatical errors, which when pointed out are almost always immediately noticed, have been left uncorrected. Third, the discourse is strictly linear – all the respondents (except for the Administrator) simply answer the initial questions that were posted by the student who started the topic. There are no attempts to develop the topic by asking related questions, or by adding information that wasn't specifically requested by the topic initiator.

2.1.1 Student feedback

Overall feedback regarding the course was positive, with many students specifically mentioning the online journal. Comments such as the following were typical:

"The online journal is fun. Because experience like that is first. I can ask many things and answer to everyone."

"I like the online journal in second semester. First reason, because I can know about classmates. I am able to communicate with this writing classmate. Second, I can do many questions to everyone."

"Third, I think writing in online journal is much more interesting than writing in a notebook because we are able to know what our classmates think and talk about the topic with our classmates. So, I really enjoy writing in online journal these days."

"I think the online journal is better than the journal of the first term because we can know things everyone are interested in and we can exchange opinions."

"Third, about the online journal. It’s useful for our writing English. Keep doing it year by year. And if you don’t mind, I would like to attend it while I am in Shibaura University."

Several students compared the journal writing activity of the first term
(which was non-collaborative and used a notebook) with that of the second term, and the online journal was clearly more popular, although it is not possible to say whether this was due to its collaborative nature, its online status, or a mixture of these two factors. What can perhaps be said is that students enjoyed the collaborative side of journal writing and that enabling collaborative journal writing is made much easier by placing the journal in cyberspace, where it can freely be accessed by any class member, from anywhere, and at any time.

2.1.2 Other aspects of the class

Another aspect of the class that was positively evaluated by students was the choice of composition topics. In general, the teacher tried not to be too prescriptive, providing students with guidance and feedback regarding the mechanics of paragraph construction and giving them a range of topics to choose from. This provision of topic choice was greatly facilitated by referring students to the following website: <http://www.japantoday.com> (see Figure 3) and in particular the "Pop Vox" section of the site, where people on the street are asked to voice their opinions on topics of current concern in Japan. Allowing students to choose topics of interest from this page not only saved the teacher time but also provided students with examples of model sentences that they could include in their own writing.
2.2 Description of Essay Writing class homepage at Rikkyo University

This class used online message boards and conferencing software to introduce interactivity into writing activities. Message boards are simply web pages where people can write comments and read those that others have left. In this class, message boards were used to facilitate peer feedback/evaluation (see Figure 4). Although the value of peer review is still being debated (Scott, 1996) it currently forms an integral part of most writing classes which adhere to a process-based approach. Web-based message boards facilitate peer feedback through making it possible for more students to comment on an essay in a shorter period of time.
Pre-writing activities form another important part of the process approach to teaching writing. In this class, collaborative pre-writing activities were attempted using NetMeeting, a software program that enables several people to communicate with each other simultaneously and online using either speech (audio only, and/or video) or writing. Whilst NetMeeting is a powerful piece of software, the utility of having people communicating online when they are sitting together in the same room is questionable. Perhaps this is symptomatic of what Chapelle (2001, p.44) describes as the tendency of CALL practitioners to focus primarily on solutions rather than problems when they are designing learning activities. In other words, teachers are intrigued by the potential of a certain technological aid or device and look for a way to utilize it in their class, rather than looking at instructed second language acquisition processes and deciding how, if at all, technology might be used to assist in these processes (notice that the key phrase is “if at all”). However, if collaborative writing were to involve individuals who are not physically present in the same space, then this program would be very useful.
Teacher feedback is a central part of any writing class, although as with peer feedback, there is debate about how effective it is, and what form it should take. In non-computer assisted writing classes this teacher has often gone to great lengths to provide opportunities for one-to-one teacher-student conferencing as a means of giving feedback. However, needless to say, this was time-consuming for both teachers and students. Whilst the value of such conferences was not in question, trying to arrange conferences with a class of 35 students was often a logistical nightmare. In the present class, the teacher used the audio capabilities of the Internet to provide feedback to students on the first drafts of their essays. At this stage of the writing process students, writing benefits most from a more general, holistic type of feedback, rather than a detailed analysis of grammatical mistakes. In order to preserve something of the atmosphere of a one-to-one conference, and to provide students with extra listening practice, the teacher decided to make this feedback spoken. A commentary on each student’s essay was digitally recorded and uploaded to the homepage (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The webpage from which students could download the teacher’s feedback.
Students were able to listen to these comments and make appropriate revisions to their essays. Use of audio feedback in this way also has an unexpected benefit when compared to conferencing. Namely, students are able to listen to the teacher's comments as many times as they like, and repeat parts over and over again which perhaps they find difficult to understand.

Feedback on students' second drafts of their essays was also given digitally by using the "check/comment" editing feature of Microsoft Word. This allows the teachers, if they receive students' writing by email or floppy disk, to open a file and write comments directly into the body of a document. The use of colour coding for comments and corrections adds even more functionality to this tool since it enables teachers to point out different categories of error and have students work out the exact form of each specific mistake, rather than having the teacher try to correct everything.

3.0 Interactive (speaking/listening) class at Rikkyo University

3.1 Online self-assessment of speeches

Use of the computers and the Internet for language teaching is not limited to the writing class. In the Interactive World English (IWE) class at Rikkyo University students have to practice public speaking. In order to facilitate improvements in their speaking skills the teacher recorded their first presentations using digital video. Small segments of each student's presentation were then uploaded to the class homepage (see Figure 6). Students were able to watch these speeches on the Internet and were then required to fill out and submit an online self-assessment form. This was automatically sent to the teacher who responded by email with further comments and suggestions. Students were often quite perceptive (and critical) of their performances as can be seen from the following example of a comment that was submitted to the teacher:

"I think most of my gestures are pointless. I often move my hand with no purpose. I wonder whether my voice was loud enough."

In the second semester students were given the option of completing the self-assessment form, or recording their comments digitally (in the computer rooms, which are equipped for this purpose) and sending them to the
teacher. Even though the process is surprisingly simple, few students chose the latter option for submitting their feedback. Of course, this system could also be extended to allow for peer feedback of student presentations by using message boards in much the same way as they were used in the online writing class described previously in this paper.

3.2 Student feedback

Although no attempt was made to gather empirical data related to students' language learning whilst using this homepage, comments were gathered from the students at the end of the first term in order to determine whether or not these activities were worth pursuing in the second term. The feedback that was gathered in this process indicated that the students saw the class homepage as a valuable resource. The following comments are just some examples of the type of feedback that was received.

"It is helpful to understand English study in this class."

"It is interesting to listen to your comments."
“It is easy to understand because there are many colors and pictures.”
“We could look at everything, even at home.”
“We can learn English through checking your homepage.”
“We can see our own presentations and hear our voice — it’s really nice.”
“It’s very simple so it’s easy to search for what I want to see.”
“I can use it in my free time.”
“I can know what we studied if I am absent.”
“It’s useful for checking homework schedules.”

4.0 Conclusion
4.1 Final comments
This paper has described how one teacher has tried to introduce interactive Internet activities into his classroom. So far, he has been encouraged by student feedback concerning these activities. English language teachers in the 21st century must become computer literate and feel at ease with using these new technologies since it is clear that they are here to stay. In this context, it is worth mentioning that before this project began (in April 2001) this teacher had no experience of using the Internet beyond browsing other peoples’ and organizations’ webpages. However, it was surprisingly easy to come up to speed with the various technologies that are needed to design and implement a homepage for English teaching/learning. With this experience in mind, the teacher would not hesitate in encouraging other teachers to attempt to build similar kinds of homepages for their own classes.

4.2 Directions for future research
The focus of these Internet activities was on language use, rather than language learning. Although providing opportunities for language use is important (especially in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting), in order to fully justify the time and energy spent on designing and implementing Web-based activities it is necessary to answer the following question, “Does the computer-assisted learning activity designed by the teacher provide learners the opportunity to modify interaction for negotiation of meaning?” (Chapelle, 2001, p.54) Chapelle paraphrases this process as “language learning potential.” In the future, as CALL becomes ever more
technologically sophisticated, it will be vital to ensure that activities are designed with language learning potential in mind, and that teachers and researchers form and test hypotheses in order to discover whether or not these activities do indeed promote language acquisition.

Notes
1. This paper is based on a presentation that was given at the 43rd Annual Convention of the Japan Association for Current English Studies, held on October 13-14, 2001 at Tokoha University in Shizuoka, Japan.
2. URLs for the two homepages described in this paper are as follows:
<http://www.rikkyo.ne.jp/tvr/adrian>
<http://www.sic.shibaura-it.ac.jp/~adrian>

References