Pedagogical sciences

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USING THE INTERNET FOR ENGLISH TEACHING

Teachers have been using online communication in the language classroom for more than fifteen years now. From an investigation of the experiences of dozens of teachers around the world who have used the Internet in language teaching (Warschauer, l995a; l995b; 1996c;), a few common guidelines emerge that can assist teachers in successfully planning and implementing network-based learning projects.

Readers will note that these guidelines are independent of the particular technological tools being used. As has been noted elsewhere, "technology is developing so rapidly that it can often be difficult or even overwhelming to harness, somewhat like trying to get a drink of water from a gushing fire hydrant" (Warschauer, l995b. p.). In order to make effective use of new technologies, teachers must thus take a step back and focus on some basic pedagogical requirements. The following guidelines are designed to help teachers implement computer network-based activities into the second language classroom.

Consider Carefully Your Goals. There are several possible reasons for using the Internet in language teaching. One rationale is found in the belief that the linguistic nature of online communication is desirable for promoting language learning. It has been found, for example, that electronic discourse tends to be more lexically and syntactically more complex than oral discourse (Warschauer, 1996a) and features a broad range of linguistic functions beneficial for language learning (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Wang, 1993). Another possible reason for using the Internet is that it creates optimal conditions for learning to write, since it provides an authentic audience for written communication (Janda, 1995). A third possible reason is that it can increase students' motivation (Warschauer, 1996c). A fourth possible reason is the belief that learning computer skills is essential to students' future success; this reason suggests that it is not only a matter of using the Internet to learn English but also of learning English to be able to function well on the Internet.

None of these reasons are more or less legitimate than any of the others. However, since there are so many ways to integrate the Internet into classroom instruction, it is important for the teacher to clarify his or her goals. If, for example, one of the teacher's goals is to teach students new computer skills, the teacher may want to choose Internet applications which will be most useful to them outside of the classroom, with activities structured so that students steadily gain mastery of more skills. If the immediate goal is to create a certain kind of linguistic environment for students, once again, the teacher should consider what types of language experiences would be beneficial and structure computer activities accordingly. If the goal is to teach writing, Internet activities should be structured so that they steadily bring about an increase in the types of writing processes and relationships essential to becoming a better writer (see, for example, seven activities by Janda in Warschauer, 1995b).

As will be discussed further below, little is usually gained by just adding random online activities into a classroom. Clarifying course goals is, thus, an important first step toward successful use of the Internet.

Think Integration. Most teachers who have used the Internet have started out with some kind of simple key pal (computer pen pal) exchanges. And most teachers who have used these exchanges have felt something lacking. Simply put, there is no more reason to except a significant educational outcome from simply creating a pen pal connection than there is from simply bringing two students into a room and asking them to talk. Over time, greater involvement on the teacher's part in creating learning activities that create sufficient linguistic and cognitive demands on the student is needed to get maximum benefit from Internet exchanges. And, as a number of people have noted, this teacher intervention is most successful when it brings about activities and projects that are well-integrated into the course curriculum as a whole.

Bruce Roberts, the coordinator of the Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections (IECC) program, explained this point well:

There is a significant difference in educational outcome depending on whether a teacher chooses to incorporate e-mail classroom connections as (1) an ADD-ON

process, like one would include a guest speaker, or (2) an INTEGRATED process, in the way one would include a new textbook. The e-mail classroom connections seems sufficiently complex and time-consuming that if there are goals beyond merely having each student send a letter to a person at a distant school, the ADD-ON approach can lead to frustration and expected academic results‹the necessary time and resources come from other things that also need to be done. On the other hand, when the e-mail classroom connection processes are truly integrated into the ongoing structure of homework and classroom interaction, then the results can be educationally transforming (in Warschauer, 1995a, p. 95).

Of course there are many ways that Internet activities can be integrated into the overall design and goals of a course. The teacher can work with students to create research questions which are then investigated in collaboration with foreign partners. Students and long-distant partners can work collaboratively on publications. Or students can use exchange partners as experts to supply information on vocabulary, grammar, or cultural points which emerge in the class. Again, the choice has to be made by the classroom teacher, preferably in ongoing consultation with the students. Nevertheless, as Roberts suggests above, it does behoove the teacher to think about how to integrate online connections into the class rather than adding these connections on top of the rest of the classroom activities in a disconnected fashion.

Don't Underestimate the Complexity. Most English teachers, even those who consider themselves computer novices, have several relative advantages when learning to use the Internet. They are, in most cases, skilled at English, experienced at typing or keyboarding, and have some basic computer literacy. Students, on the other hand, at least in some cases, may lack these basic prerequisites. Though we have had students who are quite experienced with computers, we have also had students who had seldom used a computer; lacked basic knowledge such as how to operate a mouse or open a folder; and lacked the vocabulary, reading, and listening skills to follow instructions for using the computer

Beyond these issues of learner preparation, there are a number of other complexities in introducing Internet-based activities in the classroom. Activities in a

single class may be dependent on scheduling the computer lab, and on students finding computers outside the class time to continue their activities. Hardware and software can malfunction and computer systems can be down. Students' schedules might not permit them to return to the computer lab at a time when computers are available to complete their assignments.

Exchanges between classes are even more complex. The students might have differences in background, language, and experience which can cause further complications.

None of these potential problems mean that Internet based activities shouldn't be used. But in attempting to integrate online teaching, it is best not to be overly ambitious in the beginning. A situation which overwhelms both students and teacher in technical difficulties is not likely to bring about the desired results. It is better to start small and to create the kinds of activities which have a direct purpose and are well-integrated into classroom goals. If these activities prove successful, you can build from there and attempt a more ambitious plan the following semester.

Provide Necessary Support. Mindful of the complexities which can arise in Internet usage, teachers need to provide support sufficient to prevent students from being overwhelmed by difficulties. This kind of support can take numerous forms: creating detailed handouts that students can refer to when class is finished and the teacher's personal help is not accessible; building technology training sessions into the class schedule, not only in the beginning but on an ongoing basis; working with the computer center to set up log-on systems and other procedures which are as simple and intuitive as possible; assigning students to work in pairs or groups, both in and out of the lab, so that they can provide assistance to each other; providing details to the students about how and when they can get assistance from technology specialists or others on campus outside of class; and being available to help students at times when they are most likely to need it.

Involve Students in Decisions. The concept of a learner-centered curriculum (Nunan, 1987) predates, and has broader significance, than the Internet enhanced

classroom. However, this concept seems particularly important when considering network-based teaching.

First of all, as indicated above, network-based teaching involves a number of special complexities. It will be difficult, indeed, for a teacher to be fully aware of the impact of these complexities without regular consultation with students. This might involve anonymous surveys, class discussions, or similar means of involving students in expressing their opinions about the process of implementing technologies.

Notably favorable is that the nature of computer-mediated communication creates opportunities for more decentered interaction. To fully exploit these opportunities, the teacher must learn to become a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage". A situation which is based on communication between students but in which the students have little say over the topics or outcomes of that communication is not likely to lead to the kind of atmosphere optimal for language learning.

As pointed out elsewhere, involving students in determining the class direction does not imply a passive role for teachers. Teachers' contributions in a learner-centered, networks - enhanced classroom include coordinating group planning, focusing students' attention on linguistic aspects of computer mediated texts, helping students gain meta-linguistic awareness of genres and discourses, and assisting students in developing appropriate learning strategies.

Conclusion. A paper of this length can not completely cover the topic of network-based language teaching. Further information on this topic is available in books and on the Internet itself . In the end though, each teacher will have to find her or his own way, based on the goals of the teacher and the program, the needs of the students, and the materials and technology available. It is hoped that the guidelines outlined in this paper can provide some assistance to teachers attempting to optimally combine their own goals, their students' needs, and the power of the technology-enhanced classroom.

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