

Design English Learning Web Sites for EFL Students

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This study investigated how a group of college students in Taiwan interacted with four popular English-learning websites: *Dave's ESL Café*, *Comenius English Language Center*, *Virtual Language Center*, and *GlobalEnglish*. Three research questions were addressed in this study: (1) Will working on the four English-learning websites increase students' motivation for learning English? (2) Which of the four websites will the students like best and why? (3) What problems will the students encounter when they interact with each website? Two types of data were collected. First, the students were asked to fill out two questionnaires, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the study. Second, they wrote papers to evaluate each website according to the criteria of user-friendliness, acceptance and effectiveness. Based on the findings, the researcher provides suggestions on what factors need to be considered when designing an English learning website.

With the rapid growth of the Internet technology, the potential of using World Wide Web as English teaching and learning resources seems to be unlimited. In fact, as an English teacher, I am often asked by my students to recommend some English learning websites for them to improve

their English abilities outside the classroom. However, many students also complain that they are overwhelmed by the tremendous amount of information on the Internet and that they are disoriented in the process of learning on the Web. Thus, to better understand how students interact with English learning websites and what problems they may encounter, this study was conducted to investigate how a group of EFL college students in Taiwan responded to four popular English-learning websites.

To look for the four English-learning websites appropriate for the research purpose of the study, I first looked into books and articles that introduced or reviewed various English-learning websites (林, 2000; Kelly, 2000; Lin, Wu, & Wu, 2000; Nelson, 1997; Schackne, 2001; Sperling, 1998; Wang, 1998; Warschauer, 1995; Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000). Two criteria were used in the selection of the four English-learning websites. The first criterion was that the website had to be a well known, popular website; that is, it had to be cited and recommended by ESL/EFL professionals. The second criterion was that the website was designed to teach general English, not just a specific aspect of English. As a result of this literature review, four English learning websites were selected. They were *Dave's ESL Café* (<http://www.eslcafe.com/>), *Comenius English Language Center* (<http://www.comenius.com/>), *Virtual Language Center*

(<http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/default.htm>), and *GlobalEnglish* (<http://www.globalenglish.com/>).

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study were the students I taught last year in a Freshman English Class at the Chinese Culture University in Taiwan. There were a total of 57 students. Among them, 33 were males and 24 were females. They all had learned English for at least 6 years. However, their scores on the College Entrance Exam ranged from 10 to 66, indicating their proficiency were either at the beginning or low intermediate level.

As to their computer experiences, 47 of these students (82%) owned a personal computer. In addition, they used computers quite often. Forty-five of them (78%) reported that they used computers at least three days a week, and about a half of them (49%) used the computer more than two hours a day. Moreover, they used computers for a variety of purposes. For instance, fifty of them often used computers to send/receive e-mail, 44 used computers to search for information on the Internet, and 36 used computers to do word-processing. All of these data suggest that this group of students had little difficulty getting access to computers and were quite experienced computer users.

However, these students' computer-using behaviors dramatically changed when the language became

English. For instance, although 37 (65%) of the students stated that they e-mailed either every day, or every two or three days, 55 of them (about 96%) said that they never or seldom e-mailed in English (see Table 1). In addition, while 35 (61%) of them indicated that they surfed the Web for information either every day, or every two or three days, 49 (86%) of them never or seldom visited English websites (see Table 2). These data suggest that these students were quite inexperienced in using English on the Internet and that they hardly ever worked on English-learning websites.

Table 1: Subjects' sending/receiving e-mail frequencies in Chinese versus in English

| In Chinese | Never | Seldom | Once a month | Once a week | Once in 2-3 days | Once a day |
|--------------------|-------|--------|--------------|-------------|------------------|------------|
| Number of subjects | 3 | 8 | 2 | 7 | 17 | 20 |
| %ages | 5.3% | 14.0% | 3.5% | 12.3% | 29.8% | 35.1% |
| In English | Never | Seldom | Once a month | Once a week | Once in 2-3 days | Once a day |
| Number of subjects | 37 | 18 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| %ages | 64.9% | 31.6% | 1.8% | 1.8% | 0% | 0% |

Table 2: Subjects' surfing-on-the-Internet frequencies versus visiting English websites frequencies

| Surfing on the Internet | Never | Seldom | Once a month | Once a week | Once in 2-3 days | Once a day |
|-------------------------|-------|--------|--------------|-------------|------------------|------------|
| Number of subjects | 1 | 10 | 3 | 8 | 22 | 13 |
| %ages | 1.8% | 17.5% | 5.3% | 14.3% | 38.6% | 22.8% |
| In English | Never | Seldom | Once a month | Once a week | Once in 2-3 days | Once a day |
| Number of subjects | 30 | 19 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| %ages | 64.9% | 31.6% | 5.3% | 5.2% | 1.8% | 1.8% |

Data Collection Procedures

Two types of data were collected. First, the students were asked to fill out two questionnaires, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the study. The questions on the first questionnaire were designed to ask for information concerning students' background (e.g., name, gender, and years of learning English), their attitudes toward learning English, and their experiences of using computers and learning on the Internet. The second questionnaire was intended to find out how the subjects responded to the four English-learning websites after they explored each website. The questions on this

questionnaire include: How would they rank these four websites in terms of their preferences? What do they think are the advantages of the website they like the most? What are the disadvantages of the website they like the least? Do they think the way combining Internet learning and English instruction in this class has increased their motivation for learning English and why? Has working on the English-learning websites enhanced their confidence in learning English independently? Which of the four websites is most user-friendly and why? Which website is most motivating and why? Which website enables students to learn English most effectively and why? And what other factors should be considered when selecting an English-learning website?

As for the second type of data, students were asked to explore the features of each website. After interacting with each website, they wrote a paper to evaluate the website according to the criteria of user-friendliness, acceptance and effectiveness (陳, 1999). User friendliness includes clear directions, immediate feedback, and flexibility. Acceptance refers to whether the design of the website can catch students' attention and motivates them to explore various features on the site. Finally, effectiveness means how much and how effectively students can learn from the information provided by the website.

Results

The following are the three search questions and the findings of this study:

Will working on the four English-learning websites increase students' motivation for learning English?

Table 3 shows that before the study, most of these students (72%) felt that their English-learning experiences were either painful or somewhat frustrating. In addition, only 15 of them (26%) felt confident about their ability to learn English independently (See Table 4). Finally, when asked whether combining Internet with English learning will increase their motivation for learning English, only ten of them (18%) said *Yes*; most of them said *Unsure*. However, the data showed that students' attitudes toward English learning became more positive after the study. Thirty-five subjects (61%) reported that the experience of working on the four English-learning Websites had increased their motivation for learning English. In addition, 38 subjects (67%) indicated that learning English through the Internet had enhanced their confidence in learning English independently. All of these data suggest that the experiences of working on these four English-learning websites did increase students' motivation for learning English.

Table 3: *Subjects' feelings toward their English-learning experiences in the past*

| | Painful | Somewhat frustrating | Neutral | Happy |
|--------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|-------|
| Number of subjects | 9 | 32 | 5 | 11 |
| %ages | 15.8% | 56.1% | 8.8% | 19.3% |

Table 4: *Subjects' attitudes toward learning English before versus after the study*

| | Have confidence? | | | Will learning English through Internet increase motivation? | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------|-------------|---|-------|--------|-------------|
| | Yes | No | No response | Yes | No | Unsure | No response |
| Before study | | | | | | | |
| Number of subjects | 15 | 41 | 1 | 10 | 1 | 45 | 1 |
| %ages | 26.3% | 71.9% | 1.8% | 17.5% | 1.8% | 78.9% | 1.8% |
| | Has increased confidence | | | Has increased motivation | | | |
| | Yes | No | No response | Yes | No | Unsure | No response |
| After study | | | | | | | |
| Number of subjects | 38 | 14 | 5 | 35 | 16 | 1 | 5 |
| %ages | 66.7% | 24.6% | 8.8% | 61.4% | 28.1% | 1.8% | 8.8% |

Which of the four websites will the students like best and why?

Table 5 shows how the subjects ranked the four websites according to their preferences. Based on the data, GlobalEnglish was chosen by 35 subjects (approximately 61%) as their favorite website.

Table 5: *Which of the four websites did the subjects like best?*

| | | First choice | Second choice | Third choice | Last choice | No response |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| Dave's ESL Cafe | Number of subjects | 6 | 7 | 11 | 27 | 6 |
| | %ages | 10.5% | 12.3% | 19.3% | 47.4% | 10.5% |
| Comenius English Language Center | Number of subjects | 6 | 17 | 21 | 7 | 6 |
| | %ages | 10.5% | 29.8% | 36.8% | 12.3% | 10.5% |
| Virtual Language Center | Number of subjects | 4 | 20 | 14 | 13 | 6 |
| | %ages | 7.0% | 35.1% | 24.6% | 22.8% | 10.5% |
| Global English | Number of subjects | 35 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 6 |
| | %ages | 61.4% | 12.3% | 8.8% | 7.0% | 10.5% |

Among the advantages identified for GlobalEnglish, the most important one was that this website could be viewed in Chinese as well as in English. Twenty-five of the 35 subjects who selected GlobalEnglish as their favorite website felt that being able to view the site in Chinese was very helpful for them to understand the directions and the content of the website. The other advantages include: well-classified features, listening practice, exercises designed for different proficiency levels, easy content, fast loading speed, etc.

Furthermore, when the subjects were asked to rank the four websites according to three different criteria (i.e., user-friendliness, acceptance and effectiveness), GlobalEnglish was again ranked first in all of these three aspects (see Table 6). When looking at how the subjects made their choices, I found that the factor of being able to view the website in Chinese emerged again as the most important factor in making GlobalEnglish the number one choice in all three aspects. Why did this factor play such an important role? One subject's comments made the reason clear: "Being able to view the website in Chinese made it easier for me to understand the directions on how to operate on the website, which in turn made me more motivated to explore more features on the site. Then, the more I explored, the more I could learn from the website."

Table 6: Subjects' evaluations of the four websites according to the criteria of user-friendliness, acceptance, and effectiveness

| | | Voted as most user-friendly | Voted as most motivating (acceptance) | Voted as most effective |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Dave's ESL Café | Number of subjects | 2 | 6 | 2 |
| | %ages | 3.5% | 10.5% | 3.5% |
| Comenius English Language Center | Number of subjects | 5 | 6 | 6 |
| | %ages | 8.8% | 10.5% | 10.5% |
| Virtual Language Center | Number of subjects | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| | %ages | 5.3% | 8.8% | 3.5% |
| Global English | Number of subjects | 40 | 33 | 38 |
| | %ages | 70.2% | 57.9% | 66.7% |
| Other responses | Number of subjects | 7 | 7 | 9 |
| | %ages | 12.2% | 12.2% | 15.8% |

What problems will the students encounter when they interact with each of the four websites?

Despite the fact that Dave's EFL Café has been strongly recommended by many ESL/EFL professionals, it was the website that the subjects of this study liked the least. The disadvantages identified for this website include:

too much text crowded together and too many choices, too many new English words, not understanding the titles or the directions, having difficulty finding the needed information, etc. In short, when working on this website, many subjects felt disoriented because there were too many features to choose from, and they did not know how to choose because the function of each feature was unclear to them. This was mainly due to their language barrier and their lack of experience in working on an English-learning website. The following is one subject's description of her experience on Dave's EFL Café:

Chia Hui: “When I got on the Dave's EFL Café website, I didn't know where to start. There were new English words everywhere. I had no motive to play with this website at all. ... After browsing through the Web pages on the site, I still could not find the language games mentioned by the teacher. Therefore, I just click on buttons randomly. As a result, a string of 'terrible' English words appeared in front of me. I tried really hard to understand it, but I couldn't. So the only thing I could do was going back to the home page. Then I saw the word **Bookstore**. I clicked on it, but the same result happened again. It was really frustrating. Besides, I had to pay for working on line. Therefore, I just ended my first visit to Dave's ESL Café.”

When the students worked on Comenius English Language Center, the situation was much better. Only three of them complained that they could not understand the directions on the website. And a couple of them felt that the homepage was too crowded and that there were too many choices. Their responses to the third website, Virtual Language Center, were similar to theirs to Comenius. The only difference was that more people complained that there were too many difficult words on the website.

Compared to the other three websites, GlobalEnglish received more praises than criticisms from the subjects. Only two subjects complained about this website. One complained that he could not understand the content, and the other complained that this website required a membership fee to get access to the full content of the website.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Based on the research results, I found that the differences in the subjects' responses to the four websites were more caused by the differences in the interface design than the content. That is, most of the subjects felt that all the four websites provided useful information, but GlobalEnglish was the website that enabled them to learn most effectively. Why? As mentioned previously, many of the subjects had hardly any experience working on an English-learning website. Therefore, for them,

the biggest challenge was figuring out how to navigate such a website. Of these four websites, GlobalEnglish is the only website that provides a tutorial for first-time visitors. Moreover, the language proficiency levels of these students were either low or low-intermediate. Therefore, despite the fact that each website provided directions and instructions on how to use the features on the website, many subjects had great difficulty understanding those directions because of their language barrier. To help students understand the directions, GlobalEnglish provides students with the choice of viewing the website in their native language. In this way, students do not have to waste time figuring out what to do and how to do it. Instead, they can focus on performing the language tasks on the website. In fact, many of the subjects in this study felt that being able to view the website in Chinese was the biggest advantage of this website. In addition to the Chinese translation, GlobalEnglish also provides a movie and a slide show to introduce all of the features to first-time visitors. Meanwhile, many activities also include a movie demonstration of how to do the activity. This can be a great help for students who cannot read well. Finally, on the GlobalEnglish website, the activities are divided according to different difficulty levels and language skills which makes it easier for students to find the information they want. To sum up, the main reason why GlobalEnglish was chosen by the subjects as their

favorite website was that it provided its visitors with the most support.

Based on the findings of the study, I provided the following suggestions:

1. Provide a tutorial along with a welcome message for first-time visitors. The tutorial can be presented in simple written English or by a movie or slide show.
2. Provide users with the choice of viewing the website in their native language.
3. The features on the homepage should be presented in a neat and clear format. Put students' sections and teachers' sections in separate areas.
4. Provide a site map or index so that users can know where they are and where they can go.
5. Separate advertisements from real content. In addition, it's better to put advertisements at the bottom of the page than at the top.
6. Provide a purpose statement for each feature and a demonstration on how to use it.
7. Provide learning aids such as on-line dictionaries and concordances.
8. The exercises should be interactive. Explanations should be provided for incorrect answers.
9. Provide a placement test for students to find out their proficiency levels.

10. Divide activities into different levels and skills so that students can choose activities according to their own proficiency levels and interests.
 11. Allow students to download the materials from the website to their personal computers, or make pages printable so that they can study offline. This can make it easier and less expensive for students who have a slow Internet connection.
 12. Allow students to upload their output to and get feedback from the website.
 13. Make sure all the links work.
- In conclusion, a designer of an English-learning website should not expect users to know as much about the site as he/she does. To help users of the website to learn effectively, the designer should provide them with as much support as possible.

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