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Creating an Interactive Homepage to Enhance Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This project aimed to provide EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students and outsiders with better access to the course materials and better interaction with each other to enhance both the students' motivation for learning English and the delivery of EAP teaching itself. Data collected from 40 questionnaire surveys and ten follow-up interviews concerning the effectiveness of the use of the present homepage suggest that an overwhelming majority of the students found the homepage attractive, effective and useful for their English learning. It has provided an extra, easy and reliable means for them to learn English in their own time.

Key words

Language teaching, language learning, interactive mode

Introduction

As browsing and using the Internet have become almost daily activities for many university students, the project explored the effectiveness of integrating the use of a homepage in course design in addition to the traditional classroom learning and teaching. The homepage provided information on five main areas: course syllabus and material of LANG 1330 *English for Academic Purposes B.A. (Hons.) Music*, other learning material on English learning designed by the project investigator; useful links that are helpful for the students to improve their English on their own, visual

material like photos of the class together, and a discussion forum that allows the students and the course teacher to interact with each other.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of this project are threefold:

1. to provide students of LANG 1330, students of the investigator's other EAP courses, and outsiders, with better access to the course materials and more opportunities to interact with each other;
2. to enhance EAP teaching and learning in general by motivating students to

have more academic exchanges with peers on the web, and

3. to encourage the students to use other sources available on the homepage to continue and consolidate their English learning in their own time, at their own time and by themselves.

Methodology

Findings concerning the students' response to the integration of the homepage and its effects on the delivery of the EAP course in particular and on the students' English learning in general were gathered through three channels: the homepage Guestbook on a continuous basis, in-class questionnaire surveys conducted by the project investigator in four classes with a total number of 60 students at the end of November 2000, and ten follow-up interviews in late April 2001.

Results/Findings

According to the findings gathered from both quantitative and qualitative methods, the overall responses to the setting up of a course homepage were very positive. Visitors to the homepage included not only the students taught by the project investigator, but also peers of the students of the project investigator and some former students and outsiders, which was quite a surprise for the project investigator. Feedback of the homepage mainly focused on five aspects: its layout and design, content, accessibility, reliability and most important, its usefulness and effectiveness for the students' English learning.

Layout and Design

Out of the 60 students polled, a large majority of them, 82%, stated that the layout of the homepage was attractive and interesting, while some male students thought that more graphs and animation could have been included in the homepage. The colour used was especially appealing to female students who thought the homepage carried the right colour tone. They liked the simple division of content, which made things easy to find. Although it mainly contained words without many pictures or graphs, it appeared pleasant and attractive in its own way. As one of the informants said, "It is an interesting and beautiful website. Its design is creative. The website really attracts me to stay and learn English."

Accessibility

Most of the students found the homepage easy to access since it was connected to the University homepage address. Having said that, it was often much easier and quicker to access with the computers on the University campus than with the students' own computer at home, depending on the kind of online system the students used at home. On the whole, students found "learning through the internet is a convenient, easy, quick method which should be promoted nowadays," as one of them said.

Reliability

Comments about reliability from respondents and informants were

surprisingly common. Many of them found this an important consideration when using information from the Internet. Since the homepage was designed and intended to be used by their teacher (the present project investigator) for her students in particular, a large majority of them found it more reliable. What is more, they could personally approach the teacher when they had a question about the content on the homepage, which made the homepage feel more trustworthy.

Content

The content covered in the homepage was found appropriate and right for the needs of the students. Since the homepage was mainly designed to enhance the accessibility of course materials and interaction among students of the course, *LANG 1330 English for Academic Purposes B.A. (Hons.) Music*, 92% of the students in this course found the course materials and course outline provided on the homepage helpful to them. Besides the course materials, 90% of them also found the other three components - English learning material, links and forum - very suitable since the particular content catered for their needs. Other EAP students and even some former students shared the same view. As one of them said, "I think this homepage is quite useful for students because its content is practical. Although my English is very poor, I will try my best to finish the tests in this homepage." One last item that received unexpected appreciation was the inclusion of my former students' photos under "Precious Moments". A large number of

students found this very interesting and enjoyable since they could see some of their peers online, partly share the joy that their teacher/project investigator had experienced with the former students, and knew that one day they would be on the site as well.

Usefulness and Effectiveness for the Students' English Learning

Most of the respondents found the homepage useful and thought it helped to improve their English learning. They commented most on the practicality and usefulness of the materials in "Learning Materials" and "Links". Among the material under speaking, writing and grammar, they liked what was included in writing and grammar most. An overwhelming majority (90%) said that the sample writing items, which mainly centered on job application, scholarship application, pursuing further studies and other practical purposes specifically for students, were just right for their needs. Besides, since these writings were authentic pieces collected by the project investigator while teaching, they appeared particularly practical and right for the needs of the students studying at the University.

Some grammar tests were another popular item under "Learning Materials". To the project investigator's surprise, quite a few students who visited the homepage were eager to try out the tests themselves and asked the teacher to follow up when they had a problem understanding the key provided on the site. Amazingly, the tests appeared more encouraging than

Studies on Teaching and Learning

the project investigator expected. As one of them wrote to the project investigator, "I have finished three tests of 'Test Your Grammar'. The result is quite good. I get six correct out of ten in every test. Does that mean that my English standard is quite good?"

This kind of question and response gave the project investigator a chance to communicate with her students and get to know their interests and needs, so that she could continue to help them with their English learning. Last but not least, many found the links recommended by the project investigator under "Links" useful and helpful for their English learning. As the project investigator was more familiar with what was available in the field of English learning and teaching and with the needs of her students, the links selected were found particularly appropriate and useful for the respondents. In a way, the respondents thought that the project investigator has introduced them to many other ways to improve their English through the useful websites she recommended in this homepage.

Areas to Improve

The findings show that possible improvements for this homepage lie in two main areas: more variety of content and better sound effects. A number of the respondents, 32%, thought that the content included in the homepage could be more varied. At the moment, the content mainly focused on the learning of academic English and practical English. To make the content more interesting and attractive, particularly

to some students who enjoyed more visual material like comics, the project investigator could include some links to children's literature and sites offering the use of comics in English learning. In addition, the project investigator can also insert sound effects so that the effect of some items on speaking proficiency can be improved. In terms of materials under the section "speaking", some respondents also suggested including the learning of pronunciation, a rather weak area of most of the students in the group surveyed.

Discussion

The project explored how the use of a course homepage could enhance the teaching and learning for the course *LANG 1330 English for Music*, other EAP courses and language teaching and learning in general. Clearly the project stimulated a certain number of students to use the net to further their language learning on their own. It particularly met the needs of students who wanted to learn in their own way, and provided a chance for practice in autonomous learning. As with many other multimedia devices used in the classroom, however, making the most of a course homepage in language learning requires a certain level of monitoring and facilitation from the course teacher so as to maintain the students' interest and motivation. In the absence of human communication and interaction the students will lose focus and learning will eventually stop.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

The impact of using a course homepage and the net on the teaching and learning in the course *LANG 1330 English for Music and EAP course* in general can be seen respectively from the perspectives of teacher and student. By integrating the homepage in the regular classroom teaching and learning, both the project investigator and the students found their work more enjoyable and rewarding.

The Enhancement of Teaching

From the teaching perspective, the project increased the variety of course learning materials, provided an extra, efficient channel for the teacher to communicate with her students after class, and opened up more topics for discussion between the teacher and her students. Firstly, besides the *LANG 1330* course outline and information, the teacher uploaded some extra English learning materials that she had found useful for this particular group of students at the University and useful material on English learning in general. This greatly expanded the variety of learning materials she planned to use for the course because the original EAP course was quite limited to academic English, while the students need a lot more than pure academic English. Secondly, the course homepage provided another channel for the teacher to get in touch with her students. As the course time was only three hours a week, the course homepage became an additional online channel for the teacher to have an access to her

students and vice versa. Most important, the homepage stirred more common language between the teacher and her students as the students discovered more learning materials prepared by the teacher and other channels of English learning suggested by the teacher. It developed the rapport between the teacher and her students, which directly improved the interaction between the two parties.

The Enhancement of Learning

From the learning perspective, the project investigator found three major positive changes among her students. First of all, the students did show more interest in learning other aspects of English, like grammar, as well as academic writing. They also found the links provided very useful and helpful, which boosted their intrinsic motivation for learning the language. A 'boring' course - the general opinion about English learning - could be a fun and positive experience with the facilitation of what was presented through many other sites of English learning. Secondly, what is more encouraging to see is that these initial interest and motivation were turned into action as the students tried out the English tests or tasks provided by the project investigator, and they followed up this practice and sought clarification and further understanding from the project investigator through the net. This proved to be a real enhancement of the students' English learning. Lastly, by using the net, the students also enhanced their communication with each other in terms of their intellectual exchanges. The peer

review of each other's writing on the net has provided an online learning opportunity for them to learn from each other.

Limitations/Difficulties

The difficulties of using the design of a course homepage that aims to achieve what was suggested in the present project lie in two main aspects: the maintaining and updating of the homepage and the full integration of the course homepage in the course syllabus and delivery. To keep the information posted on the site requires the project investigator to acquire a certain level of technical skills of website design. Since this is an on-going process, the project investigator cannot rely too much on the help from the technician or student helper. Also, the project investigator needs to be sensitive to the way students' use the site to maintain their interest in using the site. The second major difficulty lies in the integration of the homepage with the design of the course work and schedule in every class operation. Since the homepage was partly designed to enhance the interaction and to provide another channel for students to work on their assignment on the net, the project investigator needs to sort out her course schedule and work requirement very carefully in order to ensure a smooth process when the students are required to use the net to process their course work.

Conclusion

To conclude, the project investigator found the design and integration of the course homepage an encouraging experience. It

received very positive responses not only from her own students, but also the peers of her students. What is most rewarding for the project investigator is to find out that the homepage did boost some of the students' motivation and interest in learning English on their own. At the same time, it did provide the project investigator and the students with another effective channel to communicate with each other. However, to make the most use of the course homepage together with the other elements in the course, the project investigator needs to further adjust the form of course work and schedule so that students can fully use the design of the homepage. Besides, in order to maintain the students' interest in using the site, the homepage needs to be updated frequently and revised to include a wider variety of learning materials.