Integrating the WWW in a TESL Methodology Course: Challenges, Reactions, Outcomes

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In addition to being proficient in employing effective instructional methods and materials, teachers who want to be fully prepared to succeed in today's world must also have technology skills. One of the most rapidly developing areas of technology is the use of the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) as teaching tools, communication channels, and information resources.

Recognizing these trends (also noted by Long, Dennison, & Reehm, 1996, p. 717; Browne, Kent, Hosticka, & Clark, 1996, p. 793; and Murphy & Cifuentes, 1996, p. 784), I concluded that it was important for the preservice teachers in my “Introduction to ESL [English as a Second Language] Methodology” course to gain experience with the Internet and World Wide Web early in their academic careers. This essay recounts my experiences as an ESL educator integrating these telecommunications tools in my methodology course and, concurrently, convincing and teaching my students to use them. It also reports on my students’ changing attitudes and developing skills regarding their use of these technological tools. In this way, it helps answer the research question, “What does it take to get practicing and prospective teachers to start using the Internet and World Wide Web?”

Previous Studies along Similar Lines

Other teacher educators have conducted research to answer the question of what steps they must take to turn their students into literate and enthusiastic users of the Internet and WWW. For example, at last year’s Conference of the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE), Michael Land related his experiences integrating Internet and WWW resources into a secondary education curriculum course. Likewise, Slough and McGrew-Zoubi, who worked with “technology-reluctant preservice teachers,” investigated the question “What is required for teachers to take advantage of their Internet connections?” At SITE ’96, Andris also presented his curriculum for teaching preservice teachers how computer skills can be integrated into the curriculum, and Smith and Davenport related their “continuing saga of implementing a technology segment in the social studies course of the teacher preparation program” at their university.

All of the previously mentioned researchers worked with preservice teachers, but they used different approaches. Modules in Andris’s course taught eight computer competencies directly, and a segment of Smith and Davenport’s course focused on technology. In contrast, the others integrated the use of the WWW into courses whose major foci were on something else (e.g., curriculum or science teaching methods). I employed this latter type of teaching approach (used by Land, and Slough & McGrew-Zoubi), but the subjects in my research differed from theirs inasmuch as mine were graduate students. In addition, the subjects I worked with, who were preparing to teach
English as a second/foreign language, were from not only the United States but also a variety of other countries.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in my study were 18 graduate students (16 females, 2 males) and 2 auditors (1 female, 1 male) enrolled in Linguistics 577, Introduction to ESL Methodology, at Brigham Young University. One-third of these students were native to countries other than the United States—Australia, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Taiwan, and Tonga. In addition, most of the United States citizen students had previously experienced living abroad—in Australia, China, Germany, Israel, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Russia, etc. For the most part they were preservice teachers in their first semester of a TESL teacher preparation program. Most of them were in their early twenties, but a few were in their thirties and forties.

A computer use and skills survey conducted at the start of the semester revealed that over half the course members had access to a computer either where they lived (60%) or where they worked (50%). For those without such access, campus computer labs provided a means whereby they could access the Internet. Fifty percent of the subjects ordinarily used an IBM-compatible PC, 25% used a Macintosh, and the remainder did not know what type of computer they used or did not respond to this item.

Virtually all the students claimed to have basic computer skills, but they used them almost exclusively in “traditional” ways. For instance, 85% reported normally using computers for word processing. In contrast, only 20% had used spreadsheets, and the same percentage had experience using e-mail. Only 15% had “surfied” the Internet. When asked if they considered themselves “computer literate,” 45% replied, “Yes,” 40% indicated they were somewhat or semi-literate, and 15% said, “No.”

As noted previously, few of the subjects (15%) had any experience with the Internet, and only two of them considered themselves “Internet literate.” A few others said they were marginally Internet literate, but the great majority (70%) reported they were not Internet literate at all. When asked what they knew about the WWW, 20% responded that it was “useful” and/or “enormous,” but only 15% had actually experimented with it, and 65% wrote, “Very little,” “Not much,” or simply left this item blank.

When asked about their feelings toward learning to use the Internet and WWW, some subjects were initially enthusiastic about using computers in these new ways, some were “technology reluctant,” and a few bordered on being technophobic. How their feelings changed in the course of the semester will be reported in greater detail.

Treatment

An experiential learning approach was employed to involve the subjects in using computers and the Internet and to develop their technology-using skills. Aside from a few quick in-class demonstrations, very little direct instruction on how to use the Internet and WWW was provided. Instead, the students were almost immediately immersed in technology-dependent activities. These activities involved instruction as well as information gathering/sharing and included

- Accessing the course syllabus (objectives, requirements, calendar, descriptions of major learning activities, etc.) on the WWW.
- Following links from the syllabus to various other WWW sites, including many ESL teaching and employment resources.
- Learning the evaluation criteria for major assignments via the course WWW site.
- Viewing sample “model” assignments on the same site.
- Contacting the instructor via e-mail.
- Subscribing to TESL-oriented listservs and electronic journals.
- Using e-mail for communicating announcements and conducting other course-related business.
- Using e-mail for interstudent communication.
- Submitting assignments (journal article reports, lesson plans, etc.) electronically.
- Finding the answers to in-class quizzes on the WWW.
- Accessing electronic reserve readings from our university library.

This experiential approach was chosen for two reasons. First, the course calendar was already packed full; there was no additional time for teaching computer and Internet skills. In addition, following the overall experiential learning philosophy of the course, I felt that the most efficient and effective way for my students to learn about technology would be for them to actually use it.

Data Collection Procedures

Subjects’ feelings toward computers and technology in general, as well as the Internet and the
WWW, were surveyed at the outset of the course and at approximately one-month intervals thereafter. With the exception of the initial background survey (which, as reported above, went into considerable depth concerning their experience, skills, access, and attitudes regarding computers, the Internet, and the WWW), these periodic surveys were rather informal. Typically, they consisted of just two questions. Subjects’ responses were analyzed qualitatively and grouped longitudinally.

Findings
The results of this study are organized into two main sections. The first looks at the advantages as well as the problems of using the Internet and World Wide Web (hereafter I/WWW) from the perspective of the teacher. The second presents the reactions of the subjects to using the I/WWW.

The Teacher’s Perspective: Advantages and Difficulties

In my view, implementing the use of the I/WWW into my existing, introductory ESL methodology course produced a number of definite advantages, including the following:

- Quick and easy updating of syllabus materials (e.g., the English Language Center class schedule, which was not yet set when the paper syllabus was finalized, and certainly not weeks earlier when the paper packet originals had to be submitted to the bookstore, was easily added to the Web syllabus as soon as it became available. The same was true of the addresses, phone numbers, and contact names at various off-campus observation sites and the names and addresses of periodical review editors).

- The ability to add new materials as the semester progressed (e.g., a “Burnout” quiz that I forgot to include in the paper packet).

- “Paperless” electronic reserve readings, study questions, and even quizzes.

- A significant reduction in the number of pages in the printed packet (down to 80 pages, compared to 144 in the previous semester).

- A corresponding reduction in the cost of the packet.

- Access to useful material for students enrolled in my other courses (e.g., students in Ling. 572 were able to access the 577 WWW site to get information on ESL publishers, observation report criteria, and ESL periodicals).

- Student access to syllabus materials and guidelines at any time of the day, any day of the week, any week of the year (even late at night, on weekends, and during vacations, when most students would—and should—hesitate to call me with their questions).

- Links to a multitude of other ESL-related resources on the WWW (e.g., publishers’ sites, Kitao’s home page, and “Dave’s ESL Cafe”).

- Connections with several on-line ESL-related journals (convenient for students who couldn’t make it to the library).

- Students’ becoming computer and I/WWW literate early in their academic program, instead of complaining in my materials development course during their final semester, “We should have learned about this stuff earlier!”

- Students’ sharing their lesson plans and journal article reviews in a way that is not only “paperless” but also considerably simplified (no longer do students need to travel to the reserve library, thumb through a binder, and then photocopy their selections) and greatly extended (student submissions will remain available in a database for many years to come and can be accessed via the WWW from anyplace in the world).

- Connections with various Web sites and Internet listservs where students can learn about ESL jobs almost as soon as openings occur.

- Direct connections with professional organizations dealing with the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (e.g., TESOL and IATEFL) so students can learn for themselves about membership, conventions, resources, and other services offered by these organizations. Previously students got this information primarily by word of mouth (from professors or fellow students) or photocopied fact sheets.

- Improved coordination of students’ “practicum” teaching assignments. For this purpose, the immediacy of e-mail was a distinct advantage. The old approach to coordination and communication involved slips of paper that sometimes took three or four days to reach their addressees.
• Saving of class time previously devoted to announcements and business (now conducted via e-mail).

• Immediate distribution of urgent e-mail messages (such as job announcements) which used to be postponed until the next class period.

• Distribution of messages (announcements of jobs, grants, and competitions) in their entirety, with all relevant details, instead of a quick, oral in-class summary. If students are interested in them, they can read these announcements at their leisure and retain all the key information (instead of contacting the teacher for it). If not interested, they can quickly delete them (instead of having to listen to them anyway).

• The assurance that e-mail announcements reach all students in the course—not just those who are in the classroom at the time an oral announcement is given.

• More efficient teacher–student communication via e-mail. When I needed to communicate with a student, I found it much easier (and less threatening) to send him/her a quick e-mail message than to remember in the next class period to ask that student to stay after class and talk to me. Some students used the same procedure with me when, for instance, they had to miss class or when they wanted to ask me a question about an assignment.

• Increased inter–student communication (ranging from academic discussions to informal conversations) out of class via e-mail, which built a greater sense of community in the class. Interestingly, other teacher educators (Juanie Noland, personal communication, March 21, 1996) notes additional advantages to class listserv discussions, such as the fact that shy and insecure students cannot be interrupted before they have made their points.

On the other hand, technology is certainly not an unmixed blessing. Even with some of the new software tools, converting my syllabus and packet materials into Web pages was time consuming. Fortunately, friends and family usually came to the rescue. Then, when they finally got everything working, the College server would go down, giving students a new excuse for not doing their homework.

The Students’ Perspective: Reactions to Using the I/WWW

After being introduced to the course and its I/WWW-based assignments, the subjects were surveyed on four different occasions (in September, October, November, and December) throughout the remainder of the semester regarding their feelings about the I/WWW generally and the course materials they accessed on it.

Survey One

Administered only a few days after the I/WWW had been explained to the class, this survey consisted of only one question: “What one word best describes your feelings about the use of the Internet and WWW for this course?” The subjects’ positive and negative responses were fairly evenly balanced, with a few students remaining cautiously neutral. The positive responses used words like exciting, dandy, comfortable, fine, colorful, resourceful, and convenient. Those in the middle employed terms such as necessary, curious, possibilities, and progressing. One respondent ignored the instructions and wrote, “It has been both encouraging and frustrating” [emphasis hers]. Two students indicated that the I/WWW was “challenging.” The rest used more negative descriptors: frustrating (two respondents), unfamiliar, and undone—although whether it was the work or the student that was “undone” remains unclear.

Some students expressed their feelings through other channels. For example, a couple of weeks into the course, one student sent me an e-mail message. In it she explained that she was excited to begin sending and receiving e-mail to and from her family, former colleagues, and friends back home in Asia. In contrast, another student complained, “This is all new to me! I’m too old to learn these new tricks!”

Survey Two

A month later, students had had more experience with the I/WWW and more to say. At this point, they were asked two questions: “So far, what course-related activities or purposes have you used the Internet or World Wide Web for?” and “What one word best describes your current
feelings toward the Internet and World Wide Web?" Seventeen students responded. Once again, the reactions were mixed, but this time they were much more positive.

In response to the first question, at least two subjects indicated considerable use. One wrote, “I do at least half of my work (homework, study, research, communication, etc.) via the Internet and World Wide Web. I have found it extremely valuable with the limited time I have. It offers vast resources at home that would require much more time otherwise.” Another reported, “I use the Internet extensively in searching for information and materials for my classes.” The other students had not yet mastered the technology so thoroughly, but they were not far behind. They had used the I/WWW for the five main purposes listed below. The percentage of respondents who mentioned each purpose is indicated after the category title, and the categories are arranged in descending order.

- Course syllabus (assignment information, instructions, and criteria; course calendar; answers to quiz questions) (71%). Consulting the syllabus for course information was the most frequently mentioned use. Many respondents wrote, “I look certain things up on the syllabus (the links are very helpful)” or words to that effect. One also noted, “I printed out a few pages I lost from the syllabus.”

- TESL-related resources—ideas for lesson plans and teaching materials (35%). Only half as many respondents mentioned this category, but this use was still substantial. Responses included: “I’ve searched for ideas for my materials file. I wanted to check on songs, CNN News, and materials for the ESL classroom.” and “I’ve used it for looking up things that would help me with my teaching. I’ve found some fun locations such as cartoons, songs, etc.”

- TESL-L and ESL-oriented e-mail communication (35%). An equally large number of subjects reported using e-mail to communicate with classmates, professors, and friends/family. A few also mentioned “E-mail with listserv with some lively and pertinent discussions.”

- Information about TESL jobs (12%). Even though 577 is an introductory course, a couple of students were already combing the WWW for information on “TESL teaching opportunities.” One reported enthusiastically, “I’ve also found places where I can look up TESL jobs, etc.”

- More general WWW surfing and searching (12%). Two of the respondents also reported “surfing” or conducting more formal “Net searches” regularly.

At this stage, students also demonstrated more enthusiasm and less apprehension about using the I/WWW. Ten (59%) of the responses were decidedly positive: “Invaluable,” “Impressed,” “Feeling better and better,” “Fascinating & scary,” “Great!,” “Interesting,” “Comfortable,” “Worldwide,” “Useful,” and “Excited neophyte.” Even the less enthusiastic responses tended toward the positive: “Learning,” “I’m getting there,” “Progression,” and “Getting used to it!” Two responses were realistically balanced: “Amazing (but sometimes it’s confusing)” and “Fun, but takes a lot of time to find what one wants.” Only one was still decidedly negative, using the word frustration.

Survey Three
After another month had passed, the subjects were surveyed again. This time, subjects were even more comfortable with, and enthusiastic about, the Web. An even greater percentage of them reported uses of the I/WWW in four of the five main categories used in Survey Two. In addition, a new category of use emerged.

- TESL-related resources—Ideas for lesson plans and teaching materials (88%). As the course moved into the phase where students started doing more actual teaching, their interests naturally turned to the resources needed to support that teaching. Nearly 90% of the subjects reported searching for and “finding things for teaching—poems, songs, etc.” as well as “pictures, stories, games, etc.” In other words, “hunting for materials” and “looking for lesson plan ideas” on the WWW became extremely common activities.

- E-mail communication (56%). In comparison with the results of the previous survey, an even greater number of subjects now mentioned using e-mail to communicate with colleagues, professors, and friends. In addition, more sophisticated e-mail uses were reported. For instance, more students reported subscribing to TESL-L and other online forums to “read up on current TESL topics.” One class member had even become actively involved
in several specialized sublists, such as one for ESL materials writers.

- Course syllabus (25%). Consulting the online course syllabus and ancillary materials was the most frequently mentioned (71%) use in Survey Two. Apparently, with the passage of time, students became familiar enough with the course requirements and activities that they no longer needed to consult the WWW syllabus so often. In Survey Three, only a fourth of the respondents mentioned looking at it.

- Information about TESL jobs (19%). In contrast, the number of mentions of ESL “job-hunting” increased in Survey Three. At least one student had even started using specialized TESL employment listservs.

- More general WWW surfing and searching (13%). The number of respondents who mentioned “surfing” or “just browsing and seeing what’s there” remained the same as in Survey Two, although an additional student wished she had “more time to search.”

- Research (new category) (13%). With no specific urging or guidance from the teacher, at least two students apparently started using the Web for an additional purpose. In this survey, they mentioned doing “research” (“on topics such as English only and English plus, humor, grammar, etc.”).

Survey Number Four

In December, as the semester was drawing to a close, a final survey, with the same two questions, was conducted. This time, as before, the TESL-related resources category received the greatest number of mentioned uses. Other categories remained at about the same level as in Survey Three, but two new categories emerged.

- TESL-related resources—Ideas for lesson plans and teaching materials (93%). As the deadline for their materials files and final teaching demonstrations drew nigh, the students turned to the Web for teaching materials and ideas. A new high, 93% (all but one of the subjects), reported searching for and finding things like pictures and lesson plans.

- E-mail communication (50%). A slightly lower but similar number of respondents as before mentioned using e-mail to communicate with colleagues, professors, and friends. In addition, one student reported reading news from her homeland on the Internet.

- Course syllabus (29%). Consulting the course Web syllabus and ancillary materials had apparently leveled off by this point. As in Survey Three, about a fourth of the students mentioned looking at it.

- Other classes/work (new category) (21%). An apparent “spillover effect” occurred towards the end of the semester, after the students had become acquainted with the I/WWW. Several of them reported using it for work or other courses. This information was encouraging inasmuch as it indicated that the subjects were applying the knowledge and skills gained in my 577 course to other contexts. That being the case, the likelihood that they will continue to use the Internet in the future seems strong.

- Information about TESL jobs (14%). ESL “job-hunting” on the Internet was another fairly stable category.

- More general WWW surfing and searching (7%). The number of respondents who mentioned Web “surfing” or exploring actually went down in this survey. Perhaps that drop was due to the end-of-semester “crunch,” which typically leaves students with little free time for anything.
• Research (7%). In this survey, another student mentioned using the Internet for research purposes. No particulars were provided.

• Contacting ESL publishers (new category) (7%). Another previously unreported type of use, contacting ESL publishers, was mentioned by one respondent in this final survey. Like the other independent explorations and diversifications mentioned earlier, this contact with commercial publishing houses over the WWW was also encouraging.

In this final survey, virtually all of the one-word descriptions were positive. The terms that subjects chose (often accentuated with an exclamation point) to describe their feelings toward the I/WWW were comfortable (three respondents), fabulous, great, fascinating and interesting, interesting, exciting, essential, favorable, cool, amazing, and improved. Not one response could be categorized as negative. One, however, was honestly balanced (and probably reflects the feelings of many WWW users)—fun, but time consuming.

Some additional, unsolicited comments were also revealing and rewarding. One subject wrote, “It’s nice to have the addresses so I don’t have to do as much searching,” indicating that I/WWW use becomes easier and more efficient with the passage of time and accumulation of experience. One final comment, made by one student who had previously resisted the assignment to use the I/WWW, was especially encouraging: “It has been worth it. I’m glad you forced us into this!”

Conclusions

Changing from a paper-based course to one which relies heavily on the I/WWW is not a simple task. Such a step should not be undertaken on a whim, without support. Nevertheless, it offers many rewards, such as seeing students overcome their fears and learn to use a technological tool that will be of great use to them in the future.

The most obvious pattern in the data is the steadily increasing confidence, competence, and enthusiasm on the part of the students. For instance, the number of categories of use increased with almost every survey. Likewise, the percentage of positive one-word responses rose from 39% in the first survey to 82% in the second, 88% in the third, and 93% in the fourth. Over the same time period, the percentage of negative responses dropped from 22% down to zero.

Another interesting pattern which appeared in the data was the rise and fall over time of certain categories of use (i.e., consulting the course syllabus).

More important than any general pattern that might be deduced, however, is the realization that people react to new technology in different ways—based on their personalities, talents, or previous experiences. When introduced to the advantages of technology, many people will almost immediately put them into practice, quickly mastering the technology and becoming enthusiastic “opinion leaders.” Not all students, however, follow this path. Some continue to resist new technology and have difficulty mastering it. For example, toward the end of the semester, at least one of my students still spoke of “going to do battle with the computer” when she needed to submit assignments electronically.

Nevertheless, in the end, the great majority of students who are made aware of the benefits of the Internet and WWW and who are given freedom to explore, experiment with, and experience them will eventually, overwhelmingly overcome any obstacles in their path. At least, that was my experience in my 577 course last semester. In fact, the experience was so successful that I plan to continue and expand the use of the Internet and Web in my 577 course next fall.

Of course, the amount of confidence that these findings merit is limited. The sample was small, the length of the study was limited, and the data-gathering methods were rough. The “one-word” responses on the monthly surveys were not sufficient to capture the complexity of students’ true feelings about the I/WWW. Also, there was a potential for a “halo effect” in the responses, as subjects might have tried to make a good impression on their teacher. Additional experience in future semesters, with additional subjects and in other research settings, will be needed before any solid conclusions can be drawn.

An important question, which this study only raises, is whether the subjects will continue to use the new technology once the course is finished. While the answer to that question lies beyond the limits of this study, the data did provide some encouraging signs. For example, in Survey Three, one formerly reluctant user commented, “I plan to continue using it as a resource.” And in the fourth survey, three respondents indicated that they had already started using the I/WWW in other contexts, even though such use was not required.
In conclusion, if you have not already done so, I invite you to conduct a similar experiment in your classes and see if you get results similar to those I have reported here.

Notes
1. Those interested in seeing the actual Linguistics 577 course syllabus and related materials used in this research can find them at the following URL: http://humanities.byu.edu/linguistics/Henrichsen/577Syllabus/577frame.html

References