

Network-based Language Teaching and Learning - The Internet and Classroom -

Sung-Ryong Hong*

Abstract

The Internet is now of the fastest growing areas of telecommunications and of Computer Assisted Language Learning. It is rapidly becoming more integrated into society and accessible to people form around the world. A number of educators believe there is potential for language teaching and learning opportunities through the Internet, and have already developed uses and resources for this purpose. The range of what is available is growing continually. The purpose of this study is to research CMC via the Internet and other long-distance networks, to investigate the analyse best and worst things about studying English on the internet and to suggest some findings from the comparison between internet and classroom learning by means of questionnaire.

Keywords : Network-based, language teaching and learning, computer conferencing, CMC

1. Introduction

The Internet is not only a rich source for accessing information; it has also become a new medium of communication known as computer-mediated communication or CMC(Computer Mediated Communication). Because this is a new medium it is difficult to know what impact it will have on communication and language itself.

Access to information and opportunities for genuine communication with other are both important aspects of learning and teaching a language. The informational materials on the Internet can be valuable resources for both teachers and learners, providing many opportunities for learning.

Teachers and learners need training in how to sift through information quickly and effectively in order to find what they are looking for.

An additional benefit of the Internet

environment is its multimedia capabilities. Multimedia, in a computer context, is the combination of a number of different media such as video, sound, graphics, photographs, text, animation, etc., integrated together usually with the added possibility of interaction. This combination can be very appealing as a learning environment and can be much more stimulating than a textbook. Multimedia can make rich and effective learning environment possible if materials and tasks are well designed. Interaction with the material can be achieved through tasks that are based in the informational material presented if they require the learner to respond to the information at some level (Baker 1996).

Research on this topic is challenging due to the wide range in what is available through the Internet and how different aspects of the Internet can be used for language teaching and learning. However, it seems research (or perhaps popular demand) will be the factor determining whether the Internet is to gain credence as a useful language teaching and learning tool, or whether it is to be proven to provide nothing additional to other forms of learning.

※ 제일저자(First Author) : 홍성룡

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* 남서울대학교 부교수

srh@nsu.ac.kr

The practice of language teaching through a computer network is described by Warschauer as 'Network-based language teaching', which he divides into three components: "(1) computer-mediated communication (CMC) via local area networks; (2) CMC via the Internet and other long-distance networks; and (3) accessing and/or publishing multimedia materials online".

This thesis focuses on the second and third components only. The first, CMC via local area networks, will not be discussed in detail because its use is confined to a classroom or institution. The second and third components are accessible internationally to anyone who has suitable hardware and software, thus making it a viable medium for distance education. This thesis focuses not only on network-based teaching, but also on network-based learning.

With these possibilities in mind, this study focuses on two aspects of language teaching and learning via the Internet. The first research question is:

Question 1:

1. What English language learning mediums / courses are available on the Internet, and what are their particular features?

From the results of this survey, specific 'sites' for language teaching and learning were chosen based on their differences from each other. These were reviewed in much closer detail in order to answer the following question:

Question 2:

2. How do these English language mediums / courses reflect current theories of second language teaching and learning?

This analysis attempts to establish whether there is validity, in terms of current emphases in language theories, in using the Internet to teach or learn a language. The data were obtained from two sources: learners' appraisals of the sites they use and the researcher's evaluation of the selected sites.

2. General Research on Distance Education vs. Learning

Hiltz (1995) noted more than 80 distance education courses being offered at least in part via the Internet. In the past three years that number has grown markedly. A number of studies have outlined the various uses of the Internet and the benefits and disadvantages of teaching and learning via the Internet (see Berge & Collins 1995c which contains chapters by numerous authors exemplifying CMC in distance learning, see also Hiltz 1995, and Burgstahler & Swift 1996).

Much of the research on distance learning is also applicable, including the format of instruction used, student achievement, factors influencing good instruction, and the importance of interaction. Also of importance is how the uses of the Internet in teaching and learning can be categorized.

2.1 Student Achievement

According to research on distance learning*, learner achievement on tests appears to be higher for distance learners than for traditional learners (Trier 1996). The use of the Internet for learning appears to fit in with these results, "Britain's New Scientist magazine said

* Currently distance education is defined as: a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning.

yesterday an experiment with 33 sociology students at California State University in Northridge, found that students who learned on the Internet scored 20 per cent higher in examinations than those taught in the classroom".

Similarly, a study by Hiltz (1995) on the effectiveness of the Virtual Classroom found that mastery of course material by students in five matched courses was equal to or better than those in traditional sections. On average, students using computer-mediated communication can learn just as well as students in a traditional environment, as measured by *mid-terms*, *final examinations*, and student grades.

2.2 The Importance of Interaction

Distance learning research on of interaction, including the importance of feedback, small group interaction and frequent contact with the instructor or other learners, has produced a number of interesting results.

Egan (1991) found that distance learners value timely feedback. This concurs with the findings of Hiltz (1995) who states that, "Probably the single most important behavioral practice which produces relatively good results in online courses is the timely and 'personal' (in tone) response by instructors to questions and contributions of students online". CMC appears to allow this to occur. In a study by Ellsworth (1995), her students found that the major benefits of CMC were that they appreciated the timely feedback, the accessibility of faculty and resources outside of class hours, and they were able to get more out of class.

Small group interaction is seen as another key area of importance in distance learning. Small learning groups provide support and encouragement, and extra help when needed (Trier, 1996). According to Burgstahler and Swift (1996), CMC can promote collaborative

learning, which is defined as "individual learning occurring as a result of a group process" (Kaye, 1991).

Virtual Classroom is an environment that facilitates collaborative learning - among students, between students and instructors, among teachers, and between a class and wider non-academic communities.

3. Two Phases to the Research

There were two phases to the research:

- I. A survey of English language learning mediums/courses available on the Internet and their particular features.
- II. An analysis of a selected range of these sites in relation to current theories of second language teaching and learning. The analysis was based on two sources of data:
 - **Data Source I:** learners' appraisals of the sites they used.
 - **Data Source II:** researcher's evaluation of each of the selected sites.

The sites used for the second phase had to fit the criteria of making use of recent technology, having mediums/courses of learning that were fairly established in their construction, and were produced by academic institutions or qualified individuals.

The construction of the questionnaire was based on a set of theoretical criteria that were drawn from current theories in the field of second language teaching and learning and CALL literature. The questionnaire was divided into three sections.

The first part collected personal information including: age, gender, nationality, current residency, native language, other languages spoken, length of language learning, and computer skill. The second part included a

number of questions related to Internet access and use in general, English language learning in general, and the use of the Internet for English language learning purposes.

3.1 Basic Survey of Participants

The first phase of the research ran from December 2005 through to March 2006. The aim was to make a survey of what English language learning mediums/courses were available on the Internet. This involved searching the Internet for sites that specialized in English language teaching and learning.

The total number of respondents who answered this question was 122, this includes: 62 from D University, 54 from O University and six from S University.

The majority of users placed themselves in a range from Fair to Very Good computer skill. Overall the O respondents (Good-Excellent 76%) considered themselves to have slightly higher computer skills than the respondents from D's site (Good-Excellent 67%).

Overall the most common means by which respondents were currently studying/practising English were books (73%) and the Internet (68%), although this varied between the different sites.

The most frequently mentioned reasons for using the Internet to study English were Motivational factors (51%), Practical reasons (33%) and the Authenticity of the language (28%).

The strongest motivational factors were: easier, good learning atmosphere/method, and interesting, e.g. "It is easy and interesting for me", "it's exciting I've learned a great deal so far", "is a pleasant and funny way to do it", "I have just discovered this way of studying. It's easier than a book and more exciting", "On the Net, I can meet people from all walks of life I can exchange with them the logic of learning, the ideas of learning. That is a

wonderful place for language learning. I can really use English to communicate, that is the basic of language. I think, that is all".

The practical reason most users mentioned was convenience. Comments such as the following were typical: "it's handy for me", "When I have time I learn a new Idiom or phrasal verb".

The most frequently cited aspect of the authenticity of the language was the usefulness of the language to access information, e.g. "Having more opportunities to receive English information", "English is changing and because Internet is the fastest way to inform me of the change", "I can talk to native speakers."

3.2 The best things about studying English on the Internet

<Table 1> Best things about studying English on the internet

Best things	Sub-factors	D	O	S	Totals for sub-actors
Variety of skills	Reading/Listening/ Writing /Speaking	7	17		24
Authentic Language	Place language learning/use in real-life contexts and makes it relevant and meaningful,	13	3	1	17
	Not textbook or classroom language, but living language.	7	1		8
	Totals	20	4	1	25
Learner Autonomy	Learner has control over time and subject	12	5	1	18
	Allows learners to work at their own pace	2	2	1	5
	Totals	14	7	2	23
Practical	Convenient	8	5		13
	Speed of finding information	5	1		6
	Totals	13	6		19

The total number of respondents who answered this open-ended question was 108. Including 60 from D, 42 from O and six from S.

The most frequently mentioned items that respondents considered to be the best aspects of using the Internet to study English were:

Variety of skills (29%); e.g. "Reading the current English in variety of topics", "I can read the texts and at the same time listen to the sound".

Authentic language (28%); e.g. "I can get abundant resources of the language itself and the culture which is conveyed in the language".

Learner autonomy (25%); e.g. "that you can study when you want", "doing it at your own pace and in your own time", "the possibility to investigate different resources as well as to repeat exercises".

Practical reasons (23%); e.g. "no time constraints, free attendance", "I think the best things is very convenience".

Authentic communication (22%); e.g. "that one can talk to native speakers", "Language is a communication tool. Here I can practice it totally.

3.3 The worst things about studying English on the Internet

The most frequently mentioned items that respondents considered to be the worst aspects of using the Internet to study English were:

Practical problems (43%); e.g. "Sometimes the information "navigates" very slowly and I get a little impatient", "Staying on the net is expensive for me in China; "Staying too long in front of the monitor does harm to my eyes".

The other most frequently noted 'worst' aspect was the lack of variety of skills; namely, speaking, including pronunciation (20%).

<Table 2> Best things about studying English on the internet

Authentic Communication	Can communicate/interact with others	14	3	4	21
	Can communicate/interact with native speakers	2	1		3
	Totals	16	4	4	24
Variety of Activities/Topics	A wide range to choose from	7	6	1	14
	New features are regularly added		1		1
	Totals	7	7	1	15
Motivation	Fun/Interesting/Easier	4	2		6
Interactive	Active participation of learners	2	5		7
	Active engagement of learners	1	5		6
	Totals	3	10		13
Feedback	Learners can get help from others	3			3
	Quick feedback	1			1
Variety of Media	Offers a much richer learning experience than does a book		3		3

3.4 How learning on the Internet compares to learning in a classroom

15% of respondents thought that Internet learning was more fun/ interesting/exciting than classroom learning;

e.g. "I think learning English on the Internet is more interesting and more motivating", "partly because of its visual pleasure".

It was also seen to give learners more autonomy (12%); e.g. "I think learning English on the internet is better than in a classroom, you are free to choose your own schedule, learning time(sometimes a person takes more time to learn than another)".

Additionally it was seen to be more convenient (8%); e.g. "It depends on your time schedule that you have time to go to the classroom. Using the Internet is easily, and you do not go outside even at midnight that

you can study while you want to do".

<Table 3> The worst things about studying English on the Internet

Worst Things	Sub-factors	D	O	S	Totals for sub-actors
Practical	Speed of connection is slow	5	8		13
	Costly	9	2		11
	Difficulties connecting to the Internet	3	4	1	8
	Totals	17	14	1	32
Variety of skills	No speaking practice	6	4		10
	No pronunciation	3	1	2	6
	No Listening	5	1		6
Authentic Communication	Lack of real human interaction	3	3		6
	No face-to-face interaction	3	3		6
Variety of Activities/ Topics	Limited language learning resources		5		5
	Language learning exercises are not updated often enough	1	1		2
Motivation	Boring sitting in front of computer	1	1		2
	Silly jokes, not serious	1	1		2

<Table 4> Classroom Learning

Classroom	D	O	S	Totals
Classroom is better	3	2		5
Feedback better, can ask questions whenever you need	4		1	5
Interesting because it involves 'real' people	2	1	2	5
More interactive with real people	4	1		5
More speaking than writing	5			5
More human / social	2		1	3
More listening	2	1		3
Better for beginners		2		2
Teachers are important for learning	2			2
Must follow a schedule	2			2
More new learning	1			1
Totals	27	7	4	38

<Table 5> Internet learning

Internet	D	O	S	Totals
More fun / interesting	11	5	1	17
More autonomy	5	9		14
More convenient	2	8		10
Internet is better	4	3		7
Access to limitless resources	2	2		4
Learning is more difficult	2	2		4
Easier to learn	2			2
International communication is easier	1	1		2
Internet is like a private classroom	2			2
More reading	2			2
Requires more self-motivation	2			2
Learn more vocabulary	1			1
More effective way to learn	1			1
More flexible	1			1
More opportunities to produce the language			1	1
More writing	1			1

4. The Advantages vs. Disadvantages of Distance Learning

The discourse used in conferencing: combines attributes of both speech and writing. It is interactive and spontaneous like speech, but shares the permanency and reusability of written messages.

There are new programmes being developed constantly for chat users as attempts are made to speed up the message exchange process for Web based programmes. Additionally, a number of programmers are trying to bring in some form of visual stimulation in the form of role playing a character and choosing an image to represent the character*.

The following section of 4.1 outlines a number of advantages and disadvantages of distance education and distance learning when using computer conferencing via the Internet.

4.1 Advantages

- Interaction possible with other learners and/or the instructor vs. studying alone.
- Possibility of building a virtual 'community' which provides support, encouragement, promotes sharing and can help reduce the isolation of remote areas.
- Access to expert guest lecturers via conferencing.

4.2 Disadvantages

- Technical problems and lack of reliable access to networked computers
- Steep learning curves for new computer users
- As most conferencing is still text-based, the lack of social cues can cause miscommunication to occur. However, the prejudices based on appearances or handicaps are less likely to be encountered. The lack of social cues can act as a leveller.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on two aspects of language teaching and learning via the Internet.

Firstly, the research provided a limited survey of what was available on the Internet specifically for English language teaching and learning. From the results of this survey, specific sites for language teaching and learning were chosen based on their differences from each other.

These were analysed in order to determine the extent to which the sites reflect current theories of second language teaching and learning. The analysis attempted to establish whether there is validity, in terms of current emphases in language theories, in using the Internet to teach or learn a language.

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* for an example of a programme see <http://welcome.thepalace.com/instantwelcome/instantpalace/instantpal.html>.

홍성룡



1985년 : 경희대학교 영어영문학과
(석사)

1993년 : 경희대학교 영어영문학과
(박사)

1995년: 경기도청 전문위원(국제협력)

1996년: 신성대학 전임강사

1997년 ~ 현재 : 남서울대학교 부교수

관심분야 : 원격 교육, e-Learning, 웹서비스