BASIC WEB DESIGN AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB: A CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION COURSE

by Kevin Schoepp
English Instructor
Sabanci University
Istanbul, Turkey
schoepp@sabanciuniv.edu

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rapid spread of the Internet, and specifically the World Wide Web, has presented an unprecedented opportunity for EFL educators to access and interact with a wide range of resources. A parallel is often drawn between Gutenberg's printing press and the changes being brought about by the WWW because of the simplification of the publishing process and the changes entailed for literacy and learning. Whereas only a few years ago it was primarily the teacher providing students with authentic materials in an EFL setting, today the WWW has changed this process. In fact, students cannot only access materials via the WWW, they can actually produce and publish work. Therefore, as the technological sophistication of students increases because of these new opportunities, so too must both the instructors and the courses increase technological sophistication. New courses need to be developed which challenge these new technologically mature students, and take advantage of the newly available opportunities.

At the core of this change is the web page. Previously, it may have been thought that skills pertaining to the evaluation of, searching for, or an introduction to creating web pages was sufficient to develop web literate persons; it is not. Rather, the ability to publish quality web pages is the natural progression in Web literacy. The purpose of this paper is to describe an EFL course developed around Web design and the WWW. The course is part of the preparatory language school at Sabanci University, Turkey, for which Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is the chosen methodology. Through an

investigation of the individual course components and pertinent educational theory, educators should be able to understand, adapt and apply similar courses to their situation.

LITERATURE

Students are very receptive to this CBI course based around web design. This is not surprising when one considers what has been written about student motivation, technological literacy, and CBI. The following section will provide a theoretical basis by investigating pertinent literature from which the course was developed before providing a description of the course itself.

A great deal of literature describes the positive effects of computer technology, and more specifically the Internet, on student motivation in English language learning. While the WWW is only one component of the Internet, it has been dubbed the *killer application* since it has driven the popularity of the Internet. Firstly, Warshauer and Whittaker (1997) suggest in their teacher guidelines for effectively using the Internet which is based upon the experiences of dozens of teachers that students use the Internet to learn English, and learn English to better utilize the Internet. In addition, they discovered that students are motivated by the importance of computer literacy in future endeavours. Similarly, Fox (2000) observed that students realize that the entire world is connected through the primarily English Internet; therefore, they are highly motivated to learn English to be able to effectively participate in this new medium. Meloni (2000) writes that one of the reasons teachers are enthusiastic regarding the Internet is that many students enjoy using computers, which increases motivation, which in turn increases language use, which leads to an increase in proficiency. Personal examples of the ability of this web design course to motivate students are that many take the initiative to become the webmasters for student clubs or university departments. One student in particular designed and maintains the site for Kar Seramik www.karseramik.com, a bilingual English-Turkish site for his parents' company. Not only are the students improving their English, they are thrilled to learn a skill which they see as having very practical applications in their increasingly wired world.

Students believe that being able to create effective websites is now an essential component of being a literate person. There are a number of descriptions for types of literacy which relate to literacy in the information age and support the student views. According to Kasper (2000b), success in a digital society depends on multi-literacies, that is, skills in both academics and technology use. Perhaps Leuhrman (1982) defined computer literacy best in stating that it is the ability to do something constructive with a computer. While what could have been done with a computer has changed dramatically, the basic understanding of what is constructive has not. It can be argued that the ease of which people can now produce and publish websites is similar in its gravity and constructiveness to Gutenberg's printing press because of the simplification of publishing. Hence, publishing web pages is now an essential component of technology literacy.

Additionally, the essential definition that this paper hopes to expand upon is that of web literacy. Reinhardt and Isbell (2000) define web literacy as the technical, critical, and analytical, skills users need to effectively locate and evaluate online information according to their personal or academic needs. The foundation for the web design course is the belief that in the very near future, building and maintaining websites will be an integral element to web literacy; hence, the definition will need to be expanded. In fact, the construction of websites is one of the precursors to electronic literacy according to Shetzer (1998). These definitions help to provide an effective framework for the course by demonstrating the importance of technology. As technology evolves, so too will the pertinent definitions.

The final component to this theoretical support is CBI. It is the chosen method for achieving the learning objectives because of its many benefits. Kasper (2000a) states that the theoretical foundation for CBI emphasizes the importance of interacting with authentic, challenging materials in a communicative academic context. Stryker and Leaver (1997) assert that communicative competence is acquired during the process of learning about content. This is a fundamental underpinning of the language program at Sabanci University. Whether or not students have been able to achieve the program's goals to an acceptable level has yet to be determined since the year has not been completed. However, the CBI program that was in place last year yielded a 100% pass

rate for all the students who entered at the highest level. Students in the course are required to learn about web design and issues pertaining to the WWW such as history, privacy and censorship. Through the study of this authentic material, students develop communicative competence which is reflected in the goals of the program. Part of the success of the course can also be attributed to the fact that technology plays such an important role and is more than just an extra. Research findings suggest that the most successful pedagogical models using technology are ones that make technology an integral component (Kasper, 2000b). This is because it promotes active engagement in authentic language (McGrath, 1998).

PROGRAM

The English language preparatory program at Sabanci University aims to improve both the students' English proficiency and their academic skills. Encompassing two discrete sections at the most advanced proficiency level, the program applies theme-based CBI. The students take a 320-hour core course along with four additional 80-hour supplemental courses spread throughout the academic year. *Basic Web Design and the World Wide Web* is one of supplemental courses which attempt to prepare the students for the rigors of an English language medium institution. They are required to pass the *Language Assessment Exam* after having successfully completed the core and supplemental courses.

The technology at the university is ideal for offering a web design course. The students and faculty of Sabanci University are very fortunate because of the amount of technology at their disposal. The situation, while fairly unique in an EFL setting, is sure to become more commonplace as technology increases. All students receive state of the art laptop computers upon admission which are upgraded every two years. The majority of the classrooms are equipped with a teacher PC, Internet connection, and digital projector; some of these rooms have student Internet ports. Finally, all teachers have their own desktop PC. Technology is obviously vital to any CBI course designed around web design and the WWW. The wired nature of the university makes it an ideal place to offer the course.

COURSE COMPONENTS

This section will describe the course by sampling, for the sake of brevity, course goals, assessment, components, and tasks. The overall goal of the course is to improve the level of the students' English language proficiency. This goal is realized through the following objectives:

The students should be able to

- create and maintain a website through Hyper Text Markup Language and Cascading Style Sheets coding
- evaluate websites in terms of design and usability
- discuss topical issues regarding the WWW
- define and use the appropriate computer vocabulary

Since students must attain a grade of 70% in the course to pass, this is the benchmark against which everything is evaluated.

As this is a CBI course which must prepare students for the rigors of an English medium university and more immediately the *Language Assessment Exam*, much of the course involves work on reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The focus of the course, however, is on creating websites by coding in HTML and CSS. This approach was chosen for a number of reasons. The first reason from a language standpoint is that HTML and CSS is American English. For Example, the HTML tag which centers an object on a page is *center*, and the CSS code for a border would be *border*. Secondly, from a web developer's view, it is important that one learns HTML and CSS, so that one is able to problem solve and make informed decisions regarding design software. Finally, no special software was provided for this course; therefore, students designed their pages using Notepad which is included on all the laptops.

The crucial component of the course is to intertwine the language learning tasks and activities into the web design, so that students remain highly motivated. This section will describe two of the easier to understand tasks. The first example combines the skills of writing an outline for a compare and contrast essay with coding lists in HTML. The task for the students is to develop a compare and contrast essay outline for two different

websites, but rather than doing it on paper, they create it as an HTML document using their knowledge of the list tag in HTML. The second example is a reading task, which assists students in interpreting and creating charts in combination with coding HTML tables. One of the issues discussed in the class is software piracy since many students have compelling opinions. Additionally, there is an abundance of literature on the WWW concerning this matter; consequently, it is easy for students to read about the subject. After a brief lesson on the structure of HTML tables, students are directed to the website of the Business Software Alliance http://www.bsa.org where they can read the software industry's policies and attitudes towards piracy. They can then formulate counter-arguments to industry statements and present these to their peers in an HTML table format. These tasks are only two of an infinite number which could be developed by teachers when combining web design with language learning.

CONCLUSION

The WWW provides teachers and students with unlimited opportunities for learning. Combining web design and language learning takes advantage of some of these opportunities. CBI which completely integrates technology into the course, as does *Basic Web Design and the WWW,* presents students with an opportunity to improve their English and learn essential literacy skills for the digital world. For these reasons, educators should consider similar courses where applicable. The ideas presented from the class can be adopted or at least incorporated into other English courses during regular computer lab hours. The course only needs to have elements of it used for the advantages to be delivered.

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