

BOOK REVIEWS

THE INTERNET AND THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

Author: Gavin Dudeney

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Reviewed by Phil Brabbs

brabbs@volny.cz

It has to be said that books like this one, which claim to provide an introduction to a subject for newcomers, often end up discouraging their readers by failing to focus on what is really necessary. Things start well, but then the reader gives up, a victim of information overload. This book is not like that.

It is very clear that Gavin has used his experience as a teacher to distill what beginners in this subject really need to know (and more importantly what they *don't* need to know) and has presented this information in a clear, unpatronising way which goes straight to the heart of the matter. For example, on the first page he admits there are hundreds of different ways of communicating using the Internet, but then goes on to say that you can get nearly everything you want from the Internet with just two things: the World Wide Web and email. What a refreshing and encouraging way to start! In addition, he takes very little for granted and explains all technical terms as they arise with a quick, no-nonsense gloss.

The book is organised in a simple, logical way. The bulk of the book is taken up by Chapter 2, which sets out 55 activity recipes for using the Internet in the classroom. These naturally presuppose a certain amount of knowledge about the Internet on behalf of the teacher. The great thing is that pretty much anything a teacher new to this area needs to know in order to get started is contained in Chapter 1.

Chapter 1 covers all the basics of how to use the WWW and email with minimum jargon and without extraneous detail. There is also a concise and easy-to-understand introduction to carrying out searches on the Internet, followed by some

very common sense advice about how to use the Internet in class. Again Gavin's teaching background comes to the fore as he advises on seating plans, back-up plans for when the technology lets you down and how to deal with the sort of objectionable material which your students are, sooner or later, bound to find (or look for) on the Net.

A great feature of the book in general, and Chapter 1 in particular, are the boxed "Tips" and "Hands-on sections". I found all the tips very useful and provided at just the right time. For example, in the section on your first visit to the Internet, a tip stresses how important it is to type in the Internet address absolutely correctly. The "Hands-on sections" suggest practical activities for you to try out what you are learning in the book.

In Chapter 2, it is very clear that this is a book "by a teacher, for teachers". The activities appealed to me as a language teacher, clearly focusing on language learning, rather than displaying the wizardry of the technology or the originality of the websites visited. I found the activities generally well explained, though I occasionally felt a key was missing (e.g., for the exercises in activities 2.9, 2.16 and 2.18). The choice of websites on which the activities are based is, however, truly excellent. Each activity is based on at least one main site, with a list of additional sites, plus further ideas, being provided in the Follow-ups/Variations section which is included in each description.

One thing I really appreciated about Chapter 2 was the way Gavin explicitly recognises that not all teachers have access to a classroom with computers permanently connected to the Internet. He could have dodged this question by merely suggesting that teachers adapt the activities to suit their situation, but he goes further than this, actually suggesting in some of the descriptions how the activities could be adapted, e.g., by printing out materials obtained from the Web and using them in a computer-free classroom.

One slight niggle about the book is that although the activities are listed by level and theme, they are not indexed by the language they focus on and there is no list of which activities are most suitable for using in an off-line situation or using printouts, nor which are most suitable for projects (though this is mentioned in the activities themselves). I also thought the book was a little thin on activities which helped students to learn the basics of how to use the technology whilst also focusing on language learning. However, overall I found the choice of activities to be excellent

and I also felt sure that Gavin has actually tried them out in class so that they would in fact work.

Chapter 3 is all about different projects you can do using the Internet. It begins with information about email penpal exchanges. One of things I really liked about this section was the way Gavin pointed out some of the pitfalls, e.g. students not getting a reply to their messages, and how to deal with these, as well as included some very helpful case studies on pp. 131-2.

The next section of Chapter 3 was one of the clearest introductions to writing web pages that I have yet come across, again focusing on what beginners really need to know rather than overfacing them with the complexity of the whole thing (and there is no doubt that web page design can get pretty complicated, if not to say downright frustrating when the pages you design don't work).

The chapter finishes with a great list of ideas for web page projects. And in a very sensible use of the Internet, there are also some sample templates for these projects available on the website which accompanies the book.

Chapter 4 deals with more advanced topics like browser plug-ins, listservs, on-line chat and browser caching. We are now near the end of the book and this seems exactly the right sort of place to deal with these potentially scary-looking topics. As usual, they are explained in a clear, down-to-earth sort of way.

Chapter 5 is more a collection of appendices than a true chapter, but all of the sections are very useful. They include advice on how to connect to the Internet, a list of Internet jargon terms with crystal clear explanations, a short but very judicial and well-organised list of useful websites, a website review form (also available on the book website) and advice about publishing student material on the web with an accompanying student release form (also on the website).

I had a quick look at the website, which seems well organised and user-friendly - I like sites which provide a site map. In addition to an overview of the book, a chat area (not yet working when I looked) and some clear-headed comparisons of web browsers and email clients, there is a lot more advanced information on the website. There seems to have been a conscious decision to keep the more complicated stuff, e.g. about HTML and image editors out of the book, which seems to me like a very good decision. I haven't had time to look at the web page design primer (downloadable in .pdf form in four parts), but if the introduction to website design in the book is anything to go by, this should be extremely clear and helpful.

To sum up, I liked this book a lot. I think it does exactly what it set out to do, i.e. provide a clear introduction to the Internet and an excellent collection of activities for classroom use. I found it clear, concise, down-to-earth, extremely useful and very teacher-friendly. Nice one, Gavin!
