**Title**

Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain: Taking a Critical Look at the Internet and Language Teaching

**Author**

Lincoln, Kirsten

Peer reviewed

# Pay No Attention to the Man behind the Curtain!: Developing a Critical Stance Towards the Internet

**KIRSTEN LINCOLN**
*L.E.N. Business and Language Institue*

As responsible language teachers, we want to teach our students target languages by using the best resources at our disposal. In addition, we want to direct them towards language learning opportunities they can access on their own. Many factors need to be taken into consideration, however, before using any new textbook, technique, game, or method. Most teachers acknowledge the wisdom of such a cautious approach when it comes to print media—yet when it comes to technology, this precept is often swept under the rug. Hundreds of sites aimed towards ESL and other language learners are being developed each day on the World Wide Web. Language teachers discovering these sites might feel a little bit like Dorothy encountering all the marvels of Oz for the first time.

It is important to remember, however, that it is our responsibility to take into account students' attitudes, levels of ability, interests, and needs before committing ourselves to using Web sites in our teaching or encouraging our students to use Web sites on their own. It is equally important to take into account our own beliefs about learning and about teaching. Although it is tempting to "pay no attention" to the teaching methods behind the glitzy curtain of technology found on English teaching Web sites, we, like Dorothy, won't get very far until we do.

### Possibilities and Pitfalls in Oz

The World Wide Web presents both possibilities and pitfalls to language teachers and students. One of the possibilities is access to informational sites, which can provide both easy access to a staggering array of

information and vast amounts of exposure to authentic language. Frizler (1995) lists some of the possibilities for ESL student writers on the Internet: exposure to natural language, increased motivation and responsibility for learning, creative outlets for publication, and raised awareness of global issues and concerns. "Furthermore," claims Frizler, "using various functions of the Internet, such as e-mail…can help ESOL students further develop their skills in reading (including skimming and scanning), writing for specific purposes and audiences, and most of all, critical thinking" (*http://thecity.sfsu.edu/~funweb/chapter2.htm*).

Possibilities for teachers include professional development via published articles and listserves, easy dissemination to students of online materials such as syllabi and course descriptions, and professional exposure of their work and ideas through Web page development or submission to online publications.

However, pitfalls abound for the unwary language teaching professional. As Liddell (1994) remarks about language software, "what we've seen is that technology applied to higher education has all focused on automating the mechanistic end…if there is one moral to the criticisms mentioned so far, it is that the media used in CALL [computer assisted language learning] are not the message; nor, apparently are the methods upon which media depends" (p. 165). These comments criticizing the reliance of many online resources on outdated methods apply to many sites aimed at ESL students as well.

Many mechanistic drill-type exercises are available online in which the magic veil of technology obscures the outdated theory behind the exercise. Perhaps the problem is that the siren call of technology and the overwhelming number of resources available on the World Wide Web too often overshadow their judicious use in language teaching. Armstrong and Yetter-Vassot (1994) echo the concern that technology has only provided another version of the repetitious grammar exercises that marked the Audio-Lingual method, replicating "its form-based nature, i.e., the programs simply provide fill-in-the-blank exercises using a glitzy, electronic format" (p. 477).

While the criticisms mentioned above focus more on the design of exercises found in language software and on the World Wide Web, other possible limitations include problems with the medium itself. Frizler (1995) worries that those students who lack interest or skill in writing may be at a disadvantage due to the predominantly literary aspect of the Internet. She also notes that non-conventional English on the Internet may possibly hinder some students. Another factor not to be overlooked is the students' expectations of the traditional classroom.

Technology-assisted language learning lends itself more towards learner-centered and/or decentralized teaching approaches whereby students have more control over their own pace and style of learning. While some students may enjoy this more independent style of learning, others may prefer the more traditional teacher-fronted classroom. At minimum, a teacher needs to consider training students on learning strategies appropriate to a lab if she decides to conduct a class online.

## Second Language Acquisition Studies
## Look at the Man behind the Curtain

Both the World Wide Web and personal computers are still relatively new, and it is impossible to guess the extent of their influence on our lives, let alone on language learning. Many language teaching professionals share with their students anxiety about using computers and about finding their way around the World Wide Web. What Allwright and Bailey (1991) term "receptivity" addresses the attitudes of students towards, among other things, the teaching medium and materials. Thus, students' attitudes towards the use of technology in the classroom should not be ignored.

Wegerif (1998) reports a lowering of motivation for some students involved with an online chat component of a class due to the inability of those students to cross a threshold from "feeling like outsiders" to "feeling like insiders" during the course. One such student reports: "It is a cold medium. Unlike face to face communication you get no instant feedback. You don't know how people responded to your comments; they just go out into silence. This feels isolating and unnerving" (p. 38). Each classroom is different and teachers must use good judgment in deciding when it is appropriate to use technology from a pedagogical standpoint and from the standpoint of how it will affect their students' anxieties about learning.

Larsen-Freeman (1995), in her discussion of the influence of linguistics, psychology, and other disciplines on language teaching pedagogy, points out that teachers should develop an eclectic approach to teaching methodology. While these other disciplines can provide information and awareness about language, they should not be the only basis upon which we construct our understanding of teaching. Although CALL certainly could be part of any eclectic teaching plan, until more research is done on such weighty issues as how students' attitudes are affected by online coursework, how ESL students process the non-linear resources of the World Wide Web, and how classroom dynamics are impacted by technology, it is premature to make any positive pronouncements about the use of World Wide Web resources in the language classroom. Nonetheless, as more and more organizations, private citizens, and educational institutions are putting up

resources, exercises, and lesson plans on the Web every day, we can ill afford to ignore this potentially awesome resource.

## Developing Critical Consumers

Collier (1995) supports classes that are highly interactive and that emphasize problem solving and discovery through thematic experience because they are likely to provide the kind of social setting conducive to natural language acquisition. Bean and Hedgcock (1996) also suggest that activities giving students practice in distinguishing between essential and nonessential information and discerning the underlying assumptions of texts go far towards preparing ESL students to deal with the varied and overwhelming kinds of input they often encounter in the real world.

The Web presents a free, flexible, and useful tool for this kind of teaching. Used well, the Web can provide a myriad of authentic texts and language experiences for students. Kimball (1997) argues that resources available on the World Wide Web may provide invaluable tools for helping students develop questioning minds:

> In the case of college classes, one way students can break with their overly-conditioned patterns of memorizing is to become immersed in subject matter like literature, economics, business administration, medicine, etc. Here, the Internet-generated materials can be flexibly arrayed to engage students with topics and cognitive tasks relevant to students' professional futures. (p. 129)

One possible solution to avoid pitfalls on the Internet, while at the same time developing the questioning mind so useful for students, involves teachers encouraging students to develop evaluative criteria for judging the different types of Web sites. Many kinds of Web sites are available on the Internet: quizzes, resource pages, links pages, multi-user domains, and others too numerous to mention. The kind of Web sites most valuable for teachers to use in evaluation exercises, I will refer to here as *informational sites*. Informational sites are those that are not put online specifically for teachers or for ESL students; rather, they exist in order to inform a general audience. Informational sites include such diverse representatives as the Peace Corps Web pages, the New York Times Web pages, and recipe indexes.

These informational sites can be used as examples to teach students important reading skills such as how to skim and scan for essential information, discover hidden assumptions, find evidence of author's credibility, judge the reasonable objectivity of an opinion, and look for supporting evidence. Harris (1997) talks about the Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness,

and Support (CARS) checklist for evaluating research sources. Applying the CARS criteria to evaluating informational sites helps students to begin developing the "questioning mind" that can serve them so well in their future learning experiences. To apply these criteria, one could ask: Does the Web site author have the credentials to inform the public about a particular topic? Is there a way to check the accuracy of the information posted on the site? Is the represented position reasonable?

One way to integrate the use of informational sites into a language course thoughtfully would be to show students Web sites that contain blatantly false, highly opinionated, or unverifiable information. The instructor can design activities for students to discover for themselves the credibility of the author or the adequacy of that author's supporting evidence. Teaching students the habit of checking resources for reasonable language and balanced presentation can help them learn to integrate these qualities into their own writing. Students can be directed towards the wide selection of resources available online that talk about evaluation.

Resource sites designed by information technology specialists such as Grassian (1998) and Auer (1997) or by teachers such as Tate & Alexander (1995) are only a few examples. Instructors can work with students in carefully choosing and evaluating the resources they intend to include in their presentation or informational paper on a current topic. With these kinds of evaluative activities, students soon not only learn skills necessary for successful use of the Internet but also begin to develop positive identities as English language Web site consumers.

## Conclusion

Although valid concerns need to be addressed when using World Wide Web resources in the classroom, the resources represented online and their potential for helping students develop independent critical thinking skills are worth consideration. The global community represented online is an important resource that needs to be given the same importance and careful critique teachers give to textbooks everyday. The Internet need not be forbidding and confusing but can be used by thoughtful teachers as a flexible and abundant free resource for language teaching. Do not be afraid to look at the man behind the curtain; just be ready to teach your students the skills necessary to see through the glitzy act.

# References

Allwright, D., & Bailey, K. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom: An introduction to classroom research for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Armstrong, K., & Yetter-Vassot, C. (1994). Transforming teaching through technology. *Foreign Language Annals*, *27,* 475-484.

Auer, N. (1997). *Bibliography on evaluating Internet resources*. Retrieved July 15, 1998 from the World Wide Web: http://refserver.lib.vt.edu/libinst/critTHINK.HTM.

Bean, M., & Hedgcock, J. (1996). Teaching students to question: Promoting analytical thinking in ESL learners. *The CATESOL Journal, 9,* 7-20.

Collier, V. (1995). Second-language acquisition for school: Academic, cognitive, sociocultural, and linguistic processes. In J. E. Alatis, C. A. Straehle, B. Gallenberger, & M. Ronkin (Eds.), *Linguistics and the education of language teachers: Ethnolinguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic aspects* [Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics], (pp. 311-327). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Frizler, K. (1995). *The Internet as an educational tool in ESOL writing instruction*.[Masters thesis]. Retrieved May 5, 1997 from the World Wide Web: http://thecity.sfsu.edu/~funweb/chapter2.htm.

Grassian, E. (1998). *Thinking critically about World Wide Web resources*. Retrieved August 2, 1998 from the World Wide Web: http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/instruct/web/critical.htm.

Harris, R. (1997). *Evaluating internet research sources*. Retrieved June 11, 1998 from the World Wide Web: http://www.sccu.edu/faculty/R_Harris/evalu8it.htm.

Kimball, J. (1997). Concept-acquisition: Tapping the internet for ideas. *JALTCALL96: Crossing borders: Proceedings of the annual JALT international conference on language teaching and learning*, 128-132.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (1995). On the changing role of linguistics in the education of second-language teachers: Past, present, future. In J. E. Alatis, C. A. Straehle, B. Gallenberger, & M. Ronkin (Eds.), *Linguistics and the education of language teachers: Ethnolinguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic aspects* [Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics], (pp. 711-723). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Liddell, P. (1994). Learners and second language acquisition: A union blessed by CALL? *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 7,* 163-173.

Tate, M., & Alexander, J. (1995). *Evaluating Internet Research Sources* Retrieved August 11, 1998 from the World Wide Web: http://www2.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/webeval.htm.

Wegerif, R. (1998). The social dimension of asynchronous learning networks. *JALN, 2*, 34-49.