

# The Internet and Foreign Language Education: Benefits and Challenges

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## Introduction

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Over the past few years, the Internet has emerged as a prominent new technology. The influence of such a powerful technological tool has pervaded all aspects of the educational, business, and economic sectors of our world. Regardless of one's familiarity with the Internet, it is repeatedly made reference to. News broadcasters and commercials, for example, will now provide web addresses, and even the recent movie, "The Net" was sparked by the impact of this new technology (Mike, 1996). Regardless of whether one uses the Internet or not, one must be clear about the fact that the we have entered a new information age and the Internet is here to stay.

Because the use of the Internet is widespread in numerous fields and domains, without a doubt, it also carries great potential for educational use, specifically second and foreign language education. This paper will therefore focus on the following questions: 1) What is the Internet? 2) How can various facets of the Internet be used in the second and foreign language classroom? 3) What are the benefits of employing the Internet in such a setting? 4) What are the disadvantages or obstacles the Internet presents in a second language classroom? Lastly, the implications of using the Internet in second language classrooms will be discussed. The Internet is the latest in a series of technological innovations for second language education. In order to understand the role of the Internet, it would be useful to provide a brief history of technology and language teaching, present a survey of the technological resources available to second language learners, and, finally consider the role of the Internet and its possibilities.

## Technology and Foreign Language Education: A Brief History

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Technology and foreign language education are no stranger to one another. In the sixties and seventies, language laboratories were being installed in numerous educational settings. The traditional language laboratory was comprised of a series of booths, each providing a cassette deck, and accompanying microphone and headphone. Teachers monitored their students' interactions by using a central control panel. The basic premise behind this technology was that if verbal behavior was modeled, and then reinforced, students would quickly learn the language in question. The language lab activities were therefore grounded in a stimulus-response behavior pattern. The more drill practice the students encountered, the faster they would learn the second language. While the language laboratory was a positive step in linking technology and language education, it was soon recognized that such activities were both tedious and boring for learners. Furthermore, the amount of student-teacher interaction was minimal, and individualized instruction was irrelevant. Besides the pedagogical deficiencies, the audio equipment was

cumbersome and prone to breakdown, and had only one function-to disseminate auditory input. These factors put together led to a shift to the communicative approach to second language education, namely, computer assisted language learning.

Microcomputers and quality CALL software provided yet another medium for language learning. Its potential as both a teaching and learning tool are widely written about in the educational literature. At present, there are a variety of computer applications available including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation tutors, spell checkers, electronic workbooks, writing and reading programs, as well as various authoring packages to allow instructors to create their own exercises to supplement existing language courses. In addition to the range of software available, CALL has also been shown to increase learner motivation (Blake, 1987). Chun and Brandl (1992) also propose that the interactive and multimedia capabilities of the computer make it an attractive teaching/learning tool. Computers can provide immediate feedback to students and students can work at an individualized pace. Software can be designed to include sound, graphics, video, and animation. Moreover, information is presented in a non-linear sequence enabling learners to select the exercises or concepts they wish to review.

Despite the advantages and widespread use of CALL, it continues to suffer from criticisms for several reasons. Many believe that learning and practicing grammar rules of a foreign language through fill-in-the-blank exercises, for example, does little to improve a speaker's ability to produce grammatically appropriate utterances (Armstrong & Yetter-Vassot, 1994). Others point out that CALL suffers from its rigidity in light of the complexities of natural languages. For example, a program designed to provide drill practice on French verb conjugation is useful for only that and nothing else. Recently, however, we are beginning to see encouraging and promising results in the area of CALL software development. Interactive video and programs which provide more authentic and communicative task-based activities are being created, which are more in line with the current theoretical and pedagogical views of learning.

## **What is the Internet?**

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While the computer is now used in some form or another in most language classrooms, and is considered standard equipment, the Internet is also gradually being introduced in the second language classroom as teachers become more familiar with it. The Internet is a confederation of thousands of computers from various sectors of society such as education, business, government and the military. It is a network of thousands of computer networks (Lewis, 1994). Each individual system brings something different to the whole (databases, library services, graphs, maps, electronic journals, etc), and the end result is a vast accumulation of information. It is a worldwide network of computers that interact on a standardized set of protocols which act independently of particular computer operating systems, allowing for a variety of access methods to the Internet. For example, the Internet can be accessed from an IBM computer in a student's home in Australia, or from a Macintosh computer at a school in Canada. It can therefore be conceived of as the equivalent of a telephone system for computers. It can be used to both exchange information through electronic mail, newsgroups, listservs, professional on-line discussion groups, and so forth, as well as to retrieve information on a variety of topics through the World Wide Web.

## **The Internet and Electronic Mail**

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Although the Internet has been available to most people, only recently have educators been realizing the potential the Internet can have in second and foreign language classrooms. The following section will therefore consider some of these potential benefits and advantages of incorporating such technology in language courses. The Internet has been used by some language instructors in creative ways - one of these innovations being use of electronic mail (e-mail), a specific feature of the Internet. Overall, e-mail can encourage students to use computers in realistic, authentic situations in order to develop communicative, and thinking skills. E-mail is easy to use and even teachers intimidated by computers can quickly become adept at using e-mail with their students. Furthermore, even timid or inhibited students can benefit from the meaningful interaction and communication e-mail makes possible. Kroonenberg (1995), for example, employed e-mail in her ESL classes at Hong Kong International School. She relates her initial experiences of working with two classes of ESL multinational students in grades 9-12, and a homogeneous group of summer school students involving Cantonese-speaking 14 and 15 year olds. The Dragon Bulletin Board System (BBS) using the TELIX communications software was established in order to allow students and teachers to send messages to each other, as well as make public entries on discussion conferences.

During the initial stages, students were logged on the system and each student created a password. Students were simply asked to write freely as in a dialogue journal. Kroonenberg (1995) believes this allows students to become familiar with the system and further allows their ideas to flow. Writing on e-mail can therefore be used to generate ideas about a topic, or can enable learners to free-write without any impositions. E-mail can also be used in various conference-type formats or to generate discussion. For example, Kroonenberg often provided students with topics of high interest in order to generate more writing. In fact, one student who was part of this project stated, "I usually get involved in the BBS because the subjects are interesting and I have a lot to say about them" (p. 25). Writing topics often involved school issues or issues that were directly relevant to the students' lives. In other conference assignments, students are the main audience. Students read entries and then respond to them via e-mail. This allows each student to express their opinion. In this manner, all opinions are voiced and heard, something which may not always occur in oral discussions in the classroom.

Chat rooms can also be carried out through e-mail. In this situation, two or more individuals can "talk" on-line about various topics or issues. For instance, language learners can be paired up and can be given a debatable topic to discuss. Such experiences, once again stimulate authentic communication and assist students in developing specific communication skills such as arguing, persuading, or defending a particular point. Listservs from around the world can offer news and discussion groups in the target language providing another source of authentic input and interaction. Cononelos and Oliva (1993) organized e-mail exchanges between entire classes of students in order to generate discussion, improve writing skills, and promote peer interaction. In this particular project, advanced level Italian students employed e-mail newsgroups to improve both their writing, as well as their knowledge of contemporary Italian society. In this manner, the teaching of culture was also facilitated through the immediate feedback and contact of L2 speakers who were interested in informing others about their culture.

E-mail can also be used to communicate long-distance with language learners in other schools, or other countries for that matter. A study exploring the potential of long-distance communication involving second language learners was carried out by Chang (1993). The goals of the study were to provide students with a real context for improving their writing,

help them to expand their ideas of "content-area" reading and functional writing across cultural boundaries, make students familiar with international telecommunications, and investigate with students, the potential effects of telecommunications on literacy acquisition (Davis & Chang, 1994).

The subjects involved in the study included undergraduate students at Taiwan's National Kaohsiung Normal University (NKNU) and students at University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC). The 8-week teleconference began with Prompt 1 in which students were asked to write letters to one another. In addition to personal introductions, students were asked to include a focus on their previous English language learning experiences and the difficulties associated with this. In Prompt 2 and 3, students were asked to use their textbooks on the History of English Language to report on interesting uses of English, (ie. connotations, spelling, etc). Prompts 4 and 5 asked the learners to work with sections of specific texts to comment on pronoun and lexical use, as well as syntactic structure. In the final prompt, both groups of students collected examples of English slang and idioms used in each country's films and music. Questions pertaining to the above were asked and responded to by students in each group.

Davis and Chang (1994) point out that as writers on both sides of the world shared questions and comments, jokes began to surface. Over time, the students' reading and writing began to change as well. Through surveys and informal case studies of student writing during the conference, it was found that for the most part, students' writing had improved in both fluency and organization. Surveys also indicated that students saw some carry over to their study literature, and that they had a better understanding of English usage. While the above examples illustrate a few uses of e-mail in the second and foreign language classroom, without a doubt e-mail can provide authentic communication and can foster awareness of both the language learner and the languages they are learning.

## **The Internet as a Teaching and Learning Tool**

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In addition to the communication benefits of the Internet, the Internet can also be used to retrieve and access information. The World Wide Web is therefore a virtual library at one's fingertips; it is a readily available world of information for the language learner. While the Internet offers numerous benefits to the language learner, a few such possibilities are examined here, in the context of language learning.

Perhaps one of the most essential pedagogical principles of language teaching is one that emphasizes the study of language in a cultural context. I, along with many other language instructors believe that language and culture are inextricable and interdependent; Understanding the culture of the target language enhances understanding of the language. To this end, the Internet is a valuable resource to both language teachers and learners. As discussed previously, e-mail on the Internet allows language learners to communicate with native speakers. In this manner, the Internet facilitates the use of the specific language in an authentic setting. The Internet can also be used to acquire information from language resources for a variety of purposes. For example, students can access current information from countries around the world. They can obtain geographical, historical, social/cultural, economic, and political information from the countries in which the target language is spoken. Students can read web versions of daily newspapers and same-day news reports from sources such as the French Embassy's gopher service, the daily Revue de Press (Armstrong and Yetter-Vassot, 1994). Such experiences can allow learners to participate in the culture of the target language, which in turn can enable them

to further learn how cultural background influences one's view of the world.

The Internet also serves as a medium for experiencing and presenting creative works. While students can peruse the information on the Net, they can also use it as a platform for their own work such as essays, poetry, or stories. Numerous public schools, for example, are making use of the World Wide Web for publishing student work which can be accessed by other web users. Students therefore become not only consumers of content, but in fact generate the content.

As Mike (1996) describes, the use of the Internet has also been shown to promote higher order thinking skills. A language teacher, for example, may instruct learners to search for specific information. Searching the Web requires logic skills. Once information has been obtained, the results must be reviewed which requires scanning, discarding, and evaluative judgment on part of the learner. The information must be put together to make a complete and coherent whole which entails the synthesis process. Such an endeavor permits students to practice reading skills and strategies. The Internet also promotes literacy for authentic purposes, as stated previously. In addition to being a supplement to reading materials, especially current information, when students are exploring the Net, they are essentially exploring the real world. Such browsing or exploration can also lead to incidental learning as they encounter a variety of information in this way.

Communication with native speakers furthers literacy development for authentic purposes, enables language learners to compare student perspectives on an issue, and allows them to practice specific skills such as negotiating, persuading, clarifying meaning, requesting information, and engaging in true-life, authentic discussion. Promotion of literacy also occurs within a social context. The interaction that results from the above situations can lead to cooperative projects and increased communication between students from all over the world, in turn leading to the development of social skills. Finally, use of the Internet can promote computer skills and the technical and conceptual experiences of using a computer.

Lastly, the Internet provides supplemental language activities which can provide students with additional practice in specific areas of language learning. These include reading tests and comprehension questions, grammar exercises, pronunciation exercises possible through the available multimedia capabilities, cloze tests, vocabulary exercises, and so forth. Students can search the Web for such sites, or teachers may recommend specific sites on the Web. Published lists are also available from various sources. For example, Paramskas (1993) offers a list of sites for both language teachers and language learners, some of which relate to issues of language learning, others which use language as a medium for discussion of culture or current affairs, and others which assist in locating native speakers.

## **The Internet Challenges**

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Up to this point in time, the above discussion has described some of the potential benefits of the Internet and how it can be used in the second or foreign language classroom. However, such a discussion would be incomplete without addressing the disadvantages or obstacles related to the use of the Internet in the language classroom. While the Internet and its various facets offer a great deal to the language learner, it is not without its problems. The nature of the Internet itself can be a disadvantage at times. When lines are busy due to many users, it may take time to access information or browse the Net and technical glitches themselves can lead to frustration. Lack of training and familiarity on

part of the teachers can make it difficult to implement the Internet in the language classroom. This requires that school administrators budget for training in this area. Foreign language teachers are especially anxiety prone to computers since they often have little experience with computers. For the most part, computers in schools are used for business or computer science courses. Costs related to training, as well as on-line costs of using a provider are issues that may interfere with implementing such a technology in schools, especially in schools that have little funding. Censorship may also be a concern to language programs and instructors. The Internet offers access to all types of issues and topics, some of which are unsuitable for children, and this in itself may result in various problems. While some precautions can be taken at the present time, they are not full proof by any means. Equity issues may also present difficulties when attempting to implement such technology in the classroom. As the commercial sector begins to assume a more prominent role in the Internet's infrastructure, rural and inner-city schools, already hard-pressed to provide Internet access, may find it less affordable. This is certainly discouraging for both language teachers and students in such educational settings (Mike, 1996). Many institutions such as these may also not have the computers or computing facilities necessary to implement such type of technology.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

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Despite these limitations and obstacles, it must be realized that the Internet's educational potential is immense. Although electronic, the Internet is an entity related to literacy - people still interact with it entirely through reading and writing. For this reason alone, the Internet is a technology that will, without a doubt, have significant implications for both teaching and learning. So what does this imply for language teachers and learners? Teachers must become familiar with using the Internet and its various functions such as e-mail. They must also learn how to use specific search tools in order to access information, search for lesson plans, or material and ideas to supplement their lessons. Lastly, language teachers must learn now to transfer files from Internet sites to their own computer and vice versa. Obtaining information or literature on the Internet, either through the Net itself, through books, or by attending workshops and courses will further assist this process. To avoid facing the same difficulties or problems associated with use of the Internet, teachers can ask students to keep track of problems that arise during use. In essence, language teachers must take the plunge and approach the Internet as a learning experience themselves. The more enthusiastic and more knowledgeable language teachers are, the more successfully they can implement Internet in the language classroom. For the language learner, the Internet offers a world of information available to students at the touch of a button. While it must be recognized that the Internet cannot replace the language classroom or the interaction between the language teacher and student, it offers a vast amount of information and lends itself to communication possibilities that can greatly enhance the language learning experience.

Certainly at this point in time, several questions need to be asked to guide future research in this area. How can use of the Internet correspond to the communicative or pedagogical goals of language teaching? How will the Internet and its related facets assist language learners in functioning in the global community? What will the real impact of the Internet in foreign language classrooms be? How can the Internet be used more effectively along side the present language curriculum? While these questions have been examined to some degree, researchers and language educators must further investigate and implement this technology to provide others with guidelines in this area.

Without a doubt we are in the center of a "monumental technological paradigm shift, one which will eventually change the way that all instructors teach and the way students learn" (Jensen, 1993). While technology should not take over the language classroom, it must be embraced in order to allow educators to do those things which they are unable to do themselves, or those which will improve what is currently being done in the classroom. As we approach the next century, it is essential that we make informed decisions about how the Internet can be successfully integrated into the language classroom. If we as educators do not rise to the challenge - who will?

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