THE IMPORTANCE OF USING THE INTERNET IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

The current article aims at providing general information about Internet, Internet based activities and their effective use and the importance of Internet in foreign language classes. The article deals with the term Internet itself and with advantages and disadvantages of Internet materials use as well as possible sources of them. Different suggestions by experts and Internet based activities are discussed and proved in this article.

Keywords: Information Technology, Internet, distant education, web sites, database, an electronic version, copyright law, criteria, e-mails, web page.

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

As it is known the 21st century is a century of Information Technology. We can't imagine our life without Internet. The Internet has already entered our ordinary life. Everybody knows that the Internet is a global computer network, which embraces millions and millions of users all over the world and helps us to communicate with each other.

Internet is a great achievement of the humankind. It has deeply changed all operations with information: storage, search, extraction, transfer and many others, we are not aware of yet. As a result of this information revolution new forms occurred in traditional fields of activity like mail, libraries and education. You will not surprise anybody anymore speaking about electronic mail, electronic library, or distant education via the Internet. Internet is a kind of information transport ranking with mail, phone, telegraph, television, and radio. It combines all their capabilities and at the same time compliments them with its specific, unique features. Internet principally changes social chronotipe, that is space-temporal organization of the society.

We can say that the Internet is becoming more and more common amongst scientists, teachers and learners of different ages as well as EFL teachers and learners. It will not be exaggeration if we say that the number of people who use Internet for educational purposes has reached its peak for the last few years. It is widely being used in different branches of education, especially in distant education.

As it is mentioned above the Internet is considered the most widespread tool of most language teachers which is often used while organizing foreign language lessons. The leading experts have also given their suggestions and recommendations about how to use the Internet, why and when to use it during foreign language classes.

In their book *How to Use the Internet in ELT* (2000) Dede Teeler and Peta Gray, leading experts, gave very useful information for teachers who would like to learn how to use the Internet, where to find information and materials for their lessons and how to manage the computer, too.

The authors say that it is not possible to say how many people use the Internet. But definitely, some of them are teachers and they seem to be using it almost for everything: updating language skills, searching for materials, learning about computer technology, keeping in touch with other teachers and friends, teaching, working on projects and other activities, or just enjoying themselves.

According to them, the Internet is probably the biggest library in the world. It is still changing and therefore it is not possible to make an index for it. But there are another ways how to search in it – the gateways.

The gateways sites are common web sites. There are listed links to other web sites or documents. They are regularly updated.

Using the Internet for distance-learning
Teeler and Gray mention some good tips how to use the Internet not only as an individual, but also in a group. As mentioned above, the teacher can keep in touch with colleagues and friends, either through email or through chat (conversation in real time) or discussions and forums. The Internet can be also used for distant learning. There are several courses on-line, which one can attend. The teacher can become a learner and extend his knowledge; or can be a leader and lead an on-line course for his students. [1]

As we noticed above the Internet is very convenient and beneficial for distant leaning and on-line courses. It makes the distances closer and gives a lot of opportunities for teachers and learners to discuss a variety of topics, to stay in touch and exchange opinions about the very problem which is being learnt. Teachers have enough chances to improve students' linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences based skills by using Internet materials and students can be assessed easily via the Internet.

There are a lot of suggestions for further resources of Internet use given by experts. The two experts Stempleski and Tomalin suggest following:
- Information for research: thanks to the Internet, planning and working out a research have become quicker and more amusing. You can search in a database and find out not only information for your research, but also another researches.
- Practical ideas for classroom use: you can find both materials on various topic and grammar materials such as theory, exercises, games etc. You just have to know how to adapt it for your pupils.
- Publishers: you can find the offers of various publishers on-line as well as some teaching tips and list of upcoming seminars and conferences.
- Dictionaries and encyclopaedias: a lot of books are now available in an electronic version on-line. You can even download some of them into your computer or you can have a link on your desktop.
- Scholarships and grants: you can find a way to fund you project / conference / travel expenses etc.[2]

Why to use the Internet for materials
According to Tomalin and Stempleski, one of the advantages is topicality – of course a lot of materials are old, but there are new ones added monthly, weekly or daily. The teacher does not have to buy the publications and can download them from the Internet or print them straight from the web page. Other one is personalization – the teacher cannot change the textbook he is working with, but he can find suitable materials on the Internet and modify them if needed.

There are some disadvantages, too.
- Firstly, it is a lack of index.
- Secondly, a lot of school still do not have facilities and students cannot access the Internet easily, not even in lessons. The teacher can, of course, print papers for students, but it is not possible to include active working on-line into a lesson plan.

Besides above told disadvantages, the teacher has to be aware of the fact that most of the materials on the Internet have not been produced for learners of English. The authors of most of the materials are native speakers, who often tend to use idiomatic expressions and sometimes there are grammatical mistakes, too.

How to adapt materials
Stempleski and Tomalin give some advice how to adapt materials for certain students. Technically, it is an easy process. The teacher can just copy and paste the pieces he wants to use. The only thing he has to be careful about is the copyright law. He should check the legal notice on the website he uses. [2]

Teachers can use a variety of Internet based activities when they teach foreign languages to learners. Before the teacher decides to use an Internet-based activity in his lesson, he should consider following points:
- What do you suppose the students to get from this activity?
- Why is it better to do this activity on the Internet rather than through another media?
- How long will be the activity? (part of a lesson, one lesson, a few lessons, a month, whole year)
- Will the students communicate with someone? Who with? (each other, another class, another school, foreign school, native speakers, some organizations or companies)
- Can you use this activity only with one class or can you adapt it for other classes and grades?

The teacher should look in the course book he uses and consider whether the activity will be challenging for his students or useless and boring. He has to set some criteria for choosing appropriate websites. There is no use in doing an on-line activity which could be as well done off-line, only for that the Internet is a novelty factor.

Another expert, the author of the publication *The Internet and Young Learners* (2004), Gordon Lewis gives his opinions about Internet by the following way: But what exactly is the Internet? For most people, the World Wide Web ('the www' or just 'the web') comes to mind, the home to billions and billions of websites on virtually any subject under the sun and explorable through the use of web browsers. The www is as diverse as hum an experience and with its graphical interface and ability to integrate text, sound, video, and pictures in a communications environment, it is a very realistic and accessible place to find authentic information for the language classroom.

Thanks to hypermedia (otherwise known as 'links') it is possible to move from one place on the web to another without having to follow a linear path. Rather like a mind map, the web can be navigated according to how an individual thinks.

This non-linear design makes the www an anarchic place. It mirrors the multiple perspectives and natural complexity of the world.

Daunting enough for mature adults, this infinite collection of random and non-sequential bits of information can be scary and confusing for children who are just beginning to organize

their ideas and knowledge, and to develop a 'world view'. Internet activities must therefore be firmly anchored in the children's own experiences and must be based on clear, purposeful tasks.

Defining these tasks in such an open-ended environment is a great challenge to teachers. The www has turned the search for content on its head. The infinite avenues to search and explore make it difficult for teachers to create meaningful frameworks for learning. If not guided, web searches can turn into unfocused, aimless wandering, never really getting to where you want to go.

But the Internet is more than the www- or perhaps less. Email is an extremely potent tool for the language classroom that can operate totally independently of the web. In fact, as we shall see in some of the activities, it is possible to use email without even venturing past classroom communication. Chat programs allow children to communicate in real time with people from around the world through text, audio, or visual connections depending on available hardware and software. They can send a quick voice message or a colourful e-card. When tied to a website, chats and email allow for an optimal integration of information and communication.

There are two reasons to be wary of chat programs, however. First there are the well-publicized risks of chat rooms being used by people with dishonourable intentions. Secondly there is the pragmatic issue of time- young learners are not likely to be able to cope with the pressures of having to compose messages in real time. The relatively calmer pace of email is likely to be more appropriate. [3]

Gordon Lewis also suggests following learning purposes: pure communication, searching for information and producing content. He says that for on-line communication, e-mails and chats are the most useful. Chat is a talk on-line, in real time. It means that two people have to be connected at the same moment, which might be difficult, especially when communicating with foreign people. Such communication requires prompt answering, which may be a difficult task for beginners. E-mail has an advantage – pupils can write it in advance and then send it. It is similar to a letter, but it can be sent immediately and the answer comes sooner, too. Formulating an e-mail is a good homework task.

Searching for information requires a web browser. It is essential to offer to students a list of web pages already approved. Otherwise they may get lost in information mass.

When the students become familiar with the Internet, they might want to produce their own web page. It can be a class web page with children's portfolios. A course class work can be presented there as well.

Lewis gives tips for criteria when choosing a web site to work with. The web site should have interesting graphics and should not be complicated. Nice colours and pictures or animations will catch children's eyes. The navigation should be clear, too. The best navigation is an iconic one, i. e. there are pictures to click on instead of words. The teacher should check in advance whether the site is quick to be loaded. Slow loading can completely damage the lesson. He is strongly recommended to check what is hidden behind the web site. There are a lot of innocent looking web pages, which finally turn out to be advertising something or being a religious or erotic sites.

As safety is concerned, Lewis warns against some potential dangers. The teacher has to keep eye on the children all the time. They cannot give their personal information, such as the address or telephone number to anyone. The teacher should check the e-mails before they are sent away and they should use only e-mail addresses already approved. The teacher should also check every unknown e-mail that comes. The teacher and the child's parents must approve all the materials published on web. [3]

According to Lewis one of the easiest ways to communicate on the Internet and share files is to create an 'e-group' or discussion list. Unlike creating a web page, which requires a fair amount of time and some basic familiarity with web tools, discussion groups have a built-in structure that you can immediately activate and start using. Unlike decentralized email that sends messages only to individual accounts, discussion lists group all postings in one place that all members of the list can access and read. This makes it easy for everybody to follow a discussion and contribute. Of course, it is also possible to have the messages on the central site sent to the individual email address as well.

One great function of e-groups is the ability to upload files to the list for every member to share. Thus, rather than creating web pages, your students could create Word documents or scan in pictures and place them as files on the group site. This might be easier for you and your students and it has the added advantage of allowing you to make content available on the web without having to find a host for your own site— a cheaper alternative for those with tight budgets.

When you create an e-group, you become a moderator and can set certain standards for the group. Some groups are very open and anyone can join. Others are more restrictive. As moderator you can set the parameters so that anyone wanting to join has to have your approval first. This is important when working with young learners.

By keeping membership approval in your hands you can safeguard against anyone prowling your site to make contact with your children for unethical purposes. Basically, you will be checking email addresses for their authenticity. If you can't reasonably trace an email address to an identifiable user or institution, don't allow them to join.

Another function that is particularly fun to use with children in foreign language classes is the polling option. This function allows you to ask the group certain questions and members can respond in multiple-choice style, making it easy for children to answer.

Since e-groups are free, you can create as many as you want- one per project or topic – or you can choose to keep everything in one place and simply change the discussion from time to time. [3]

To sum up, we should emphasize that the role of Internet in learning foreign languages is really great. The materials taken from Internet are effective and easy to use when EFL teachers organize their classes with learners of any age. Internet can provide teachers with appropriate essential materials to the topic which can suit to the program that is being taught. Besides these, Internet based activities can be used any time of the day and anywhere of the world. The only condition which teachers need is Internet access. So we can say that the Internet is one of the most efficient tools for language teachers to make their lessons more interesting and stimulating. Materials such as video, pictures, animations and games taken from Internet can easily grab learners' attention making them be interested and amused about the topic.

After analysing the topic thoroughly we have made conclusion and can suggest the following recommendations for language teachers:

- Internet based activities are really effective in language classes;
- Most materials are authentic and improve students sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences;
- Different activities and materials taken from Internet help to widen students' world outlook;
- Writing emails develop writing skills of the students;
- Chatting with each other or foreigners improve speaking and communicative skills of the learners;
- Learners get to know how to sort out sources and select necessary materials among the mass;
- Working with Internet improve computer skills of the young learners;

Finally it is obvious that organizing classes by using Internet and Internet based activities in language classes can help students to be motivated and to better their languages skills such as speaking, listening, writing, their vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. They also develop the skills that students need in real life situations. So teachers should try to make their lessons more efficient and interesting by using Internet as well as materials such as video, pictures, animations and other authentic materials, in such cases they can get objectives and learning outcomes that they have put before themselves when preparing lesson plans.

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