

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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THE INTERNET AS A RESOURCE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

RANDI REPPEN

This day and age of easy internet access and so many resources available online both for teachers and students raises many questions. What do these resources mean for English language instruction? How can teachers and students best make use of internet resources to enhance language learning? These questions related to the use of internet resources for language teaching can be approached in the same manner as any questions related to what we choose to use in our language classes. As teachers we need to determine how the material fits with our language teaching goals and our learners. Do the materials provide us, as teachers, with additional resources? Do the materials provide our learners with meaningful practice? No matter the material, these questions always need to be considered by teachers when selecting material for classroom use. This paper looks at some of the resources and tools for language learning that are available online. It also explores how these can be used effectively for English language instruction or as resources for teachers in lesson planning and preparation.

Resources for teachers and learners

The students in any language classroom bring a diverse range of experiences ranging from differences in exposure to academic writing in both their first language (L1) and second language (L2), different cultural and educational backgrounds, and different learning styles and preferences. This diversity can pose challenges for teachers. The internet can help to address some of these differences by allowing teachers to provide individual learners opportunities for additional practice with skills or aspects of language that are challenging for them, and also encouraging autonomous learning.

There are a plethora of sites that have wonderful resources for language teaching that provide teachers with useful resources for a variety of language tasks. Using a search engine (e.g., google, yahoo) and entering certain key words such as “ESL/EFL lesson plans” or “ESL/EFL activities” will result in long lists of sites that offer teaching materials and ideas. Of course, not all sites are equally worthwhile. But setting some time aside to look through some sites can result in some resources for teaching. When considering using internet resources in language classes, there are some questions that teachers should ask.

Below is a list of questions that provide a useful starting point for deciding if a particular site is worth using in a class or as a resource for individual learners.

Site evaluation checklist

- How do I want to use this site?
- Does the site match my purposes/ goals?
- Does the site do what it says it will do?
- Is the site stable, or does it crash/freeze my computer?
- Are the instructions clear and easy to follow?
- (Particularly relevant if learners will be using the site on their own.)
- Is there a user fee? Does the fee match the use that I anticipate? In other words is this a good value¹?

In addition to sites hosted by individuals, groups, or companies, most of the major publishers have resources for teachers. For example the ELT (English language teaching) webpage of Cambridge University Press will take the user to links that offer a range of teaching activities from vocabulary to grammar. There are also numerous sites that offer resources for vocabulary instruction. One of the most popular, and also one of the most useful vocabulary sites is Tom Cobb's The Compleat Lexical Tutor². The Compleat Lexical Tutor, in addition to offering a range of options for vocabulary assessment, allows teachers and students to enter texts and immediately see the vocabulary used in the text. The vocabulary from the text that has been entered is displayed according to various lists, for example, the words in the text that are found in the General Service List³, or in the various bands of Coxhead's⁴ Academic Word List (AWL). In addition to learning about the vocabulary of texts written by students, this site can also be used as a tool for teachers to discover the vocabulary load of particular readings. The reading texts can be entered into The Compleat Lexical Tutor and the teacher can immediately see the distribution of vocabulary and know if there are words that need to be pre-taught prior to her students reading the text, or if the text is too difficult for the students at this point in time. High intermediate and advanced learners can also benefit from using The Compleat Lexical Tutor. Students can enter their texts and see the range of vocabulary that they are producing and perhaps challenge themselves to increase the variety of vocabulary used in their texts. The TexLex tool on the Compleat Lexical Tutor site can also be a useful resource for comparing different drafts written by the same student.

Another extremely useful resource for both teachers and advanced students is the MICASE site. In addition to offering access to an amazing resource of academic speech (both transcripts and the sound files) collected at the University of Michigan, and representing a range language use in university settings (e.g., office hours, lectures, group discussion), the MICASE site has a collection of lesson plans and activities that use the

¹ R. Peppen, *Using Corpora in the language Classroom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, pp. 32-33.

² See Appendix A for more information on this and other online resources.

³ M. West, *A general service list of English words*, Longman, Green and Co., London 1953.

⁴ A. Coxhead, *A new academic word list*, "TESOL Quarterly", XXXIV, 2000, pp. 213-238.

MICASE corpus resources. These carefully planned lessons range from 'Listening for conversational patterns' to 'Hedging'. Several of the lessons make use of the sound files thus saving the teacher hours of searching and developing activities.

In addition to the spoken resources provided by the MICASE site, the University of Michigan also has a corpus of student papers that received a grade of A categorized by discipline. This allows both teachers and students to explore various aspects of academic writing produced by students. The over 2 million word corpus is user-friendly and has a number of useful search functions.

Online resources for speaking and writing

The internet is a rich resource for introducing students to a variety of text types, and for providing valuable listening practice, particularly in EFL contexts. In the past students and teachers in EFL contexts often did not have access to a range of different written or spoken text types. Now, the internet makes a wide range of written and spoken material readily available. The range of different texts that are available online can be used to raise student awareness of how different features (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical structures and textual organization) are used across different types of texts⁵. Students can be asked to compare different types of texts. Using online newspapers, students can be asked to compare letters to the editor with feature stories. These can be compared at various levels such as simply differences in format, to level of informality, to use of nominalizations, and so on. Another useful activity can be to take opposing viewpoints presented in a news article, or in the letters to the editor section and examine the types of evidence presented and the grammatical features that are used for overt or subtle persuasion. In addition to the variety of written texts that are available, podcasts and wikis are more recent resources that are of tremendous value to teachers and students, particularly in EFL contexts.

Podcasts are digital audio files that are available online and can be used to provide a range of listening activities. Podcasts have numerous benefits for EFL and ESL classrooms. First, they expose students to a number of different speakers, something that is not always an easy task, particularly in an EFL context. Second, they can be listened to several times, and for different purposes (e.g., getting the gist vs. getting the details). Third, because of the variety of topics available in podcasts, they can be integrated into content based lessons as additional sources of information thus providing focused listening activities. Finally, podcasts provide another opportunity to explore the different uses of oral language, thus allowing students to compare and contrast features found across podcasts from various settings and situations, or to compare features found in podcasts with those found in written texts. For example, a podcast of a particular event could be

⁵ See I. Blatt, *Internet writing and language learning*, in *Writing across languages*, G. Brauer ed., Ablex, Stamford CT 2000, pp. 89-98; B. Dieu, *Blog for language learning*, "Essential Teacher", I, 2004, pp. 26-30; T. Nelson, *Using computers to teach writing in the FL classroom*, in *Writing across languages*, pp. 99-115.

compared with a written account of that same event. In addition to listening to podcasts, students can also produce podcasts. This provides an authentic listening activity whose audience extends beyond the language classroom.

Wikis are another useful resource for the language classroom. The most well known wiki is the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. A wiki is a software program that allows users to create webpages in any browser (e.g., Mozilla Firefox, Internet Explorer) that then allows users to write collaboratively online. Pbworks is a popular, user-friendly, free wiki program that has been used by teachers to set up class wikis. A teacher can set up a class page in Pbworks that will allow students in the class to create documents and collaboratively revise documents. The class page can be set up so that only students from the class can enter. Wiki sites are often used to encourage peer editing and revision in writing classes.

Online resources for creating activities

Instead of always using the materials provided by the textbooks teachers often create or adapt activities that suit the needs of their learners or teaching settings. Hot Potatoes is a program that is available online that can be used by teachers to create activities for language classes. The activities that are created using Hot Potatoes can either be used as activities that are available on local computers, or the more common use is to post the activities to a webpage. The activities that can be created using Hot Potatoes include close or gap-fill exercises, multiple choice questions, crossword puzzles, word or sentence scrambles and also timed reading activities. The Hot Potatoes site has an easy to follow online tutorial and also links to numerous activities that have been created by Hot Potatoes users around the world and that represent a wide variety of languages.

An advantage of creating online modules with Hot Potatoes is that they can be designed to target specific needs. For example, Reppen and Vásquez⁶ created an online Scavenger Hunt for students in the IEP (Intensive English Program) using Hot Potatoes with a two-fold goal: first, to determine if students enrolled in the program had the computer skills needed to carry out web searches; second, to acquaint students with the resources available on the campus where the students were taking classes (e.g., library facilities, cafeteria hours of operation, recreation options, etc.). In addition Reppen and Vásquez created a set of linked modules designed to address issues related to academic writing. These modules included activities that practiced citing source materials, and also a set of activities that led students through series of guided activities that involved choosing and narrowing a paper topic.

⁶ R. Reppen – C. Vásquez, *Using on line academic writing modules in an IEP environment*, in *Computers in the Language Classroom: From Theory to Practice*, S. Rilling – E. Hanson-Smith ed., TESOL, Alexandria VA 2006, pp. 41-51.

In Figure 1 the reader can see how colored fonts are used in the module on paragraph writing to focus student attention on the various parts of a paragraph. Figure 2 is a screen shot from an activity that guides students through the task of writing an academic paper.

Read the following paragraph about ocean currents:

Scientists believe that ocean currents have a significant influence on the Earth's climate. **For example**, the Gulf Stream carries warm water northward from Cuba to Newfoundland, which causes the European coastal climate to be moderate. **Therefore**, much of Great Britain experiences winters which are as mild as those in Florida, which is much further south. In addition, the Kuroshio current affects climates of the western Pacific as it moves northward from the Philippines, although its effects are less than those of the Gulf Stream.

To continue the module, click below to learn more about topic sentences:

[Topic Sentences](#)

Figure 1. Using Noticing for writing a paragraph. Colored fonts (in the webpage underlined is red, bold is green and the rest of the text is blue) are used to focus student attention.

How do I write an introduction?

I. The introduction:

- Javier can begin by writing a one-sentence statement (a thesis) that sums up the focus of his essay. What could he write?

Help him by writing a statement in the box below:



- When you're finished writing, you can click [here](#) to compare your statement with Javier's.

- What else could Javier put in his introduction? Often, introductions include background information about the topic. This also helps the reader to better understand what the essay is about. Where could Javier find background information on his topic, the TOEFL?
Click [here](#) to look back at his annotated bibliography.
- In the box below, type the name of the source from Javier's annotated bibliography which can provide him with background information about the TOEFL:

After you've typed the answer, click [here](#) to check it.

- Now Javier has two things for his introduction: a thesis statement and background information. Click [here](#) to see what the introduction actually looks like.

What's next? Javier must write the BODY of his paper.



Click

to read about how he will do this.

Figure 2. A guided activity for writing the various parts of an academic essay.

In addition to these more established approaches to using the internet, social networking sites offer additional options for having students write and create podcasts for an audience outside the language classroom. Also knowing that others will see the students' work often motivates students to take a bit of extra care with the writing or podcast that they are posting on their social networking site. Of course, with these sites teachers must also spend some time addressing the etiquette (or netiquette) of communicating in these spaces and also provide students with guidelines for safe interactions and what types of information should or should not be shared.

Two books that can be useful resources for teachers beginning to use online resources in the classroom are: *Tips for Teaching with CALL*⁷ and *Teaching and Researching Com-*

⁷ C. Chapelle – J. Jamieson, *Tips for Teaching with CALL*, Pearson Longman, New York 2008.

*puter-assisted Language*⁸. The former is filled with information about different websites that can be used to teach many aspects of language, while the latter provides a thorough, but reader-friendly, overview of the field of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) and its various applications.

Online corpus resources

Online corpus resources provide an ever-expanding resource for teachers. In the earlier section, *Online Resources for Speaking and Writing*, the reader was introduced to some of the resources available from the MICASE corpus. Although there are no doubt other online corpora, this section will focus on MICASE and the corpus holdings that have been developed by Mark Davies⁹, particularly the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Time corpus. These online corpora are a rich resource for a variety of language learning activities. All three of these corpora (i.e., MICASE, COCA and Time) are tagged for parts of speech (POS). This means that each word in these corpora has been labeled as to its grammatical category. This allows users to search the corpus in very advanced ways to find out about specific grammatical distributions, word plus grammatical associations, and also to disambiguate words that have multiple functions. For example, the word *can* might be a noun or a modal depending on its use. A corpus that has been tagged for parts of speech can greatly aid in searches. For readers who want more information on the tagged corpora, or on corpus linguistics in general see *Corpus linguistics: Investigating language structure and use*¹⁰.

Other than MICASE, the other two corpora in this section currently do not have lesson plans or activities that are prepared and ready for use. These corpora still are valuable resources for both teachers and advanced language learners. In addition to much more complex tasks, teachers easily can use these corpora to practice vocabulary and also for creating activities for discovering word meanings from context. Using the concordance output from these corpora, learners are exposed to multiple instances of the target word in context and can use the context to help decipher the meaning of the word, or possibly the multiple meanings of the word. Even a supposedly simple word such as 'like' is worth exploring through the concordance lines. The screen shot in Figure 3 shows the concordance lines from the COCA for the word 'like'. However, because the lines are difficult to read from the screen shot in Figure 3, a few excerpts are provided in example 1 to show how the concordance lines provide context that learners can use to uncover the meaning of a word in context. Of course, in the actual display the target word, in this example, 'like', would be presented as the center word (as seen in the screen shot of

⁸ K. Beatty, *Teaching and researching computer-assisted language learning*, Longman, Harlow UK 2003.

⁹ See the Appendix for details.

¹⁰ D. Biber – S. Conrad – R. Reppen, *Corpus linguistics: Investigating language structure and use*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

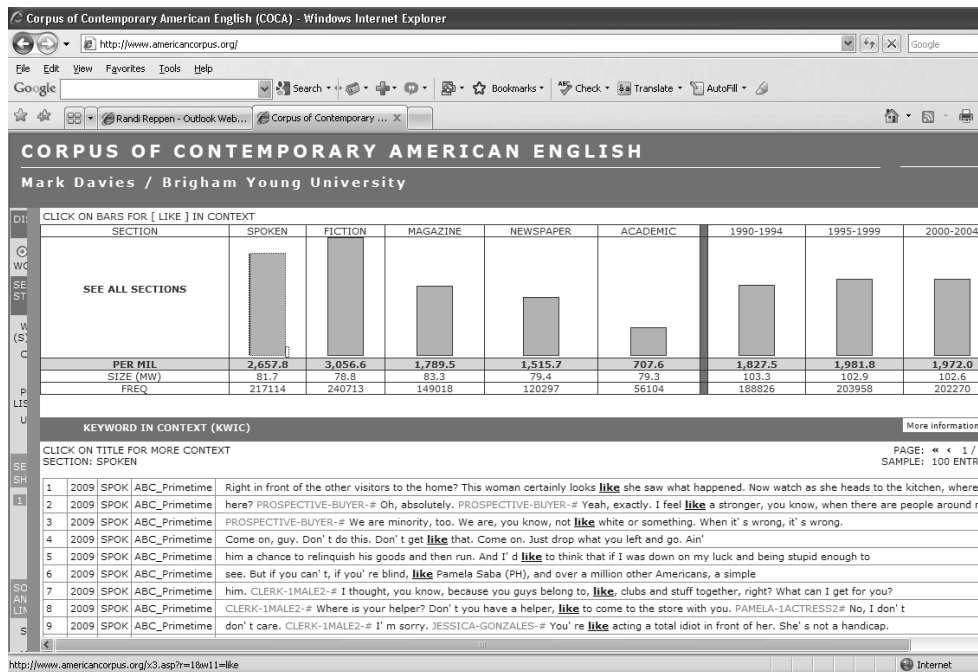


Figure 3. A screen shot of concordance lines from the COCA corpus.

Example 1. Concordance lines for the target word 'like'

yeah he seems to feel really **like** he's doing the right thing and he is
 It feels **like** maybe she made a compromise but it's like
 But, I don't really **like** going with Anne Marie because she doesn't **like** to stay
 that's only eight pounds a month which is **like** twelve dollars, twelve fifty
 He eats at least **like** four bowls of cereal a day like in addition to **like**

To go into more detail about using corpora for language learning is beyond the scope of this paper. However for readers who are interested in learning more about using corpora as a resource for language learning there are two books that address this topic: *From corpus to classroom*¹¹ and *Using corpora in the language classroom*¹².

¹¹ A. O'Keefe – M. McCarthy – R. Carter, *From Corpus to Classroom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007.

¹² R. Reppen, *Using Corpora in the language Classroom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010.

Conclusion

Online resources can provide teachers and learners with many exciting opportunities for expanding the domain of language learning to outside the traditional classroom by providing real world examples of texts in use and also by providing authentic audiences for learners' spoken and written texts. The resources that are available online are particularly relevant for EFL contexts where obtaining a wide range of spoken and written texts in the target language can present quite a challenge. In this rapidly developing area of online resources, the next five years promise to bring changes that will continue to enhance our language teaching resources and tools in ways that are almost impossible to imagine at this point in time.

Appendix A: Examples of Useful Web Resources

The Academic Word list: www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/research/awl/

Information about the Academic Word List and lists from the Academic Word List.

Academic Vocabulary: www.nottingham.ac.uk/~alzsh3/

A site with activities based on the Academic Word List.

AntConc: www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html

A freeware concordancing program that creates word lists, keywords in context, keywords, and collocates.

Cambridge University Press ELT: www.cambridge.org/elt/resources/

This site provides links to activities and lesson plans for a variety of teaching topics.

Compleat Lexical Tutor: www.lextutor.ca/

A tremendous resource for vocabulary teaching and assessment. This site allows users to input texts and get information about the vocabulary used in the text.

Corpus.BYU.edu: corpus.byu.edu

This links to many corpora that are searchable through Mark Davies interface. This site has one of the best interfaces with the BNC for word and phrase searches that include graphs and tables of search results by register.

Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): www.americancorpus.org

A 400+ million word corpus of American English arranged by register, including news, spoken, and academic texts. The texts in this corpus are from 1990 to the present. This site allows the user to also search by part of speech (POS).

Gcast: www.gcast.com

A free site that allows users to create podcasts.

Hot Potatoes: hotpot.uvic.ca

The homepage for software that can be used to create a variety of online activities. Also a source of

many interesting links to activities created by other language teachers for a variety of languages.

MICASE: micase.elicorpora.info

Transcripts and audio from a searchable corpus of academic spoken language.

MICUSP: micusp.elicorpora.info

A corpus of student papers that is searchable by a number of different specifications (e.g., abstracts, citations etc.)

NASA: www.nasa.gov/multimedia/podcasting/

Podcasts made by scientists and students with scripts available for many of the podcasts.

National Public Radio: www.npr.org

National public radio free access to audio files of newscasts and also numerous podcasts across a range of topics.

Pbworks: pbworks.com

A site with free resources for creating basic wiki pages.

Podcasts: Podcast.com

A site with links to a variety of different podcasts.

UGRU UAEU: www.ugru.uaeu.ac.ae/concordance/

Vocabulary learning based on the Academic Word List featuring concordance activities.