

Designing a web-based English language program for new-coming university students (English for University)

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Abstract

This article describes a program designed by the author for new-coming university students in the University of Benghazi, Libya. The students are all Libyans, so they all speak Arabic as their mother tongue; also, they have almost the same level of English language proficiency which is nearly intermediate level. The program makes use of freely available tools of WIX website builder, with a plenty of easy and enjoyable devices to be used. The website consists of a number of sections which represent the major language skills. Each section has additional materials and exercises for students to enhance a specific language skill. This paper describes the materials designed for teaching listening and taking notes.

Keywords: teaching listening and taking notes, WIX website builder

Introduction

In recent years, language teachers have been more concerned about the use of technology in their teaching. In fact, the most challenging skill is how to design a new program to suit their own contexts. Accordingly, it becomes highly required for language teachers and educators alike to understand clearly what procedures should be adopted in the design process, and what tools should be chosen in order to satisfy their educational goals.

In fact, it is assumed that the first consideration that the designer should take into account is the target audience by whom that program will be used. In this regard, Levy & Stockwell (2006) claim that "...an understanding of the learners' background, role, and perspective is crucial in design." (p. 35) In this paper, I am going to present a CALL project that I have been developed for my own setting, describing the context in which this program is intended to be implemented, reporting the main purpose of this program, and finally giving some details about how it works properly.

It is clear that both the potential users and the learning context attributes are essential in designing a CALL program, and teachers should be aware of such considerations to get the maximum benefits of their designs.

"...while these technological innovations facilitate computer-based learning activities....., they are ultimately tools in the hands of course authors who must use them creatively to maximize the students' language learning experience." (Chen, Belkada, & Okamoto, 2004)

General remarks:

In the homepage, URL: <http://basimfaraj.wix.com/new-eap> , there are four major sections representing the four different academic language skills which are taught in the program. For the purpose of this project, the only active section is "Listening and Note taking"; the others are just for demonstration.

Once you click on that section, you can simply follow the links down the bottom of each page (i.e. from page 1 to page 4).

Occasionally, there are some other links for extra material presented in each page, you can simply open that link and then return back to the original page by clicking on back button of “Internet Explorer”. Thanks

In regard to my own context, the program I have designed is proposed to be employed for new-coming university students in the University of Benghazi which is one of the major higher education institutions in my home country (Libya). Importantly, the students are all Libyans so they all speak Arabic as their mother tongue; also, they have almost the same level of English language proficiency which is nearly intermediate level. Moreover, it is expected that they all have basic computer skills such as searching through the Internet, playing audio-visual files, using word processing and saving different folders into the hardware. Significantly, it is highly expected that all students have the same level of difficulty dealing with academic language skills.

The general course into which this project is integrated is a ten-week intensive EAP course which is offered every year before the commencement of first semester. The organisation principle of the course curriculum is thematic in nature. All themes are academic and each one is covered with a number of activities which reflect the real situation that students will face in their academic life. The major language skills included in this course curriculum are: research and academic reading, listening to lectures and taking notes, presentation skills, and academic writing.

It is clear that all of what have been mentioned regarding the audience and the context as well as the main course curriculum are worthy being considered in selecting the educational materials and designing the website. Generally speaking, the CALL program that I have developed for this group of students is a content-based learning website. This website is aiming to enhance the academic language skills which are taught mainly in the class,

“... learners’ needs should be analyzed in order to select language components that match what students require to succeed in their academic studies.
(Kimball, 1998, p. 411)

Basically, the website is created by using the “WIX website builder” which is available online for public with no charge; it provides an ideal way of constructing websites with a plenty of easy and enjoyable devices to be used. The website I have designed consists of a number of sections which represent the major language skills mentioned earlier. Each section has additional materials and exercises for students to enhance a specific language skill. For the purpose of this project, the skill that I am going to focus on is “listening and taking notes”. This skill in particular is deemed to be one of the most challenging tasks among the tertiary students in EFL context where English is used as a medium of instruction. The materials included in this section of the website are:

Presentation of some interesting notes to be read by students in order to enhance their understanding of different listening strategies and techniques. For the purpose of providing extra information, there is a hyperlink to another webpage including some theoretical facts, and there is a video giving more details about listening and note-taking skills.

Practicing note-taking by listening to an academic lecture which indeed reflects the real situation that the students will experience. During this activity, the students need to listen and take notes; then, they need to compare these notes with a typical sample provided on another version of the same video. The tool utilised for this activity is YouTube program where the lecture is published online.

A number of exercises on listening comprehension and taking notes are presented to the students with answers to ensure that they get the maximum benefits of the program. Besides, there is an optional test to be completed and emailed to the teacher for evaluation.

For the purpose of increasing the interactivity, there is a link to “comments” page which enables students to add any suggestions to be read by other users. Also, the contact button which is linked to the teacher`s email for enquiries and assignments. Additionally, there is a link to a number of useful resources for students including online dictionaries.

In fact, the website is designed mainly as an off-class learning tool which aims to support the in-class lessons by providing extra materials and activities to be practiced by the students in a motivational and practical way. Hence, it is expected that learners work on their own time after they finish the class whether in the university where there are a lot of accessible facilities or at home in a completely self-governing environment. Importantly, such a learning strategy can be beneficial in developing the students` independence and autonomy. Hence, the role of teachers is confined in the classroom by explaining some related issues, managing the class discussion and giving feedback on the students` performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this web-based program could be regarded as a simple presentation of using technology; namely the Internet, in language education. It is clear that both the potential users and the learning context attributes are essential in designing such a CALL program, and teachers should be aware of such considerations to get the maximum benefits of their designs. Significantly, using new techniques in language teaching could be quite helpful for our students; particularly, when we design ourselves. Also, the process of designing such programs is quite easy, flexible and does not need any professional work at all.

References

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