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Self-Directed Learning through the Internet and Intranet Pedagogy: A Choice for Language Teachers

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Abstract

This article proposes “Self-Directed Learning through the Internet and Intranet Pedagogy” as a choice for language teachers to use to enhance students’ language skills, cognitive and academic abilities, computer literacy and self-actualization needs. Before introducing the method, information about students’ needs and wants as well as computer background needs to be assessed. A questionnaire on “the Use of Computer in Teaching and Learning English” as an informal classroom inventory is provided.

As the new millennium is just around the corner, language teachers are facing more responsibility. Apart from regular work, i.e., improving students’ language skills, teachers have to prepare students to cope with the world of information technology, Internet communication, as well as enhancing their self-actualization needs. How can teachers accomplish so many things simultaneously?

Self-Directed Learning through the Internet and Intranet Pedagogy seems to be an answer to language teachers. The advantages of the Internet have been mentioned by many educators. For example, Kim Gray (1997) points out that “the internet is such an

amazing, seemingly infinite collection of resources. With access to all this information, I and our teachers can be more creative, up-to-date, and ‘cool’” (Sperling, 1997:11).

Regarding self-actualization needs, Disick (1975) suggests that it can be obtained by providing a variety of learning choices in the classroom: pace, content, method or style of learning and nature of testing. Being aware of the individual differences among the students, the teacher will be viewed as the person who helps them to discover ways to move toward self-actualization in their learning activities.

At university level, English is taught as a medium of communication. It is used as a tool to seek knowledge and share information. Chulalongkorn University Language Institute has adopted the philosophy of self-directed learning because of the fundamental belief that language learning is life-long education. The teacher is the facilitator who provides comprehensible input and gives feedback to the students' output. It is the students themselves who accomplish their own objectives through self-directed learning. The teachers' role is to help activate and enhance their esteem needs.

Before the implementation of Self-Directed Learning through the Internet and Intranet Pedagogy, the needs of the students must be assessed, i.e., their ability to use the computer, their needs and wants in using the computer, and their method or style of learning. Therefore, a questionnaire on the Use of the Computer in Teaching and Learning English was distributed to 28 first-year Economic students enrolled in Foundation English II in November 1997. There were 16 female students and 12 male students. The following questions were asked in the questionnaire.

1. Can you use a computer?

2. What do you use computers for?
 - a. playing games
 - b. practising English by using Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs
 - c. typing reports
 - d. sending e-mail
 - e. getting information from the World Wide Web
 - f. getting information from CD-Roms
 - g. writing web pages

3. Do you want to use CALL programs?
If yes, which skill do you want to practise?

- a. listening b. speaking
- c. reading d. writing

4. Which types of activities do you prefer?

- a. individual work b. pair work
- c. group work

5. How many tasks do you want to perform?

6. What are the tasks that you want to do?

7. Should the tasks be graded?

8. If yes, what is a suitable score?

Regarding Question 1, 22 students (78.57%) answered that they could use the computer while six students (21.43%) said that they could not. Their answer for Question 2 is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Students' Response on Their Use of the Computer

Activities	N	%	Rank
a. Playing games	22	28.21	2
b. Practising English by using CALL programs	2	2.56	6
c. Typing reports	24	30.77	1
d. Sending e-mail	6	7.69	5
e. Getting information from the World Wide Web	16	20.51	3
f. Getting information from CD-Roms	7	8.97	4
g. Writing web pages	1	1.28	7

A large majority of the students used the computer to type reports (30.77%), and play games (28.21%). Twenty-one percent used the computer to get information from the WWW while 8.97% used it to get information from CD-Roms. About 8% employed the computer to e-mail. Surprisingly, only 2.56% used CALL programs to practise English and

only one student (1.28%) was capable of writing web pages.

Although only two students used the computer to practise their English, this does not mean that they did not want to do it. Their desire to use the computer in this respect is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Students' Wants in Using the Computer
to Practise Language Skills

Skills	N	%	Rank
1. Listening	17	25.76	1
2. Speaking	16	24.24	3
3. Reading	17	25.76	1
4. Writing	16	24.24	3

The students wanted to use the computer to practise English in four skills, i.e., listening, reading, speaking and writing. About 60% of the whole class ($n = 17$) preferred listening and reading whereas 57% ($n = 16$) wanted speaking and writing. Their answers suggest that they all wanted the four skills with the same proportion although the

percentage is not high. Presumably, this group of students probably wanted multi-skill activities.

As regards Question 4, "Which types of activities do you prefer?," Table 3 presents their responses.

Table 3
Students' Preferable Types of Activities

Types of Activities	N	%
1. Individual work	-	-
2. Pair work	10	34.48
3. Group work	19	65.52

Nineteen students (65.52%) preferred group work activities while ten students (34.48%) liked pair work tasks. Surprisingly, none of them wanted individual work activities. We can imply from this that the

popular computer based language activities are those involving interactive communication.

When asked, "How many tasks do you want?," the students gave the following responses.

Table 4
The Number of Tasks Wanted

Number of Tasks	N	%
1. One	1	4.76
2. Two	6	28.57
3. Three	10	47.62
4. Four	3	14.29
5. Five	1	4.76

The majority indicated that the appropriate number of tasks was three. The second rank was two tasks. Therefore, when planning a CALL syllabus we should consider that between two and three computer tasks

were such as most appropriate in the English class. Which tasks can the teacher provide for the students? Their responses in Table 5 probably give some guidelines.

Table 5
The Students' Preferable Tasks

Tasks	N	%	Rank
1. Playing games	8	17.39	3
2. Practising English by using CALL programs	5	10.87	5
3. Typing reports	1	2.17	7
4. Sending e-mail	9	19.57	2
5. Getting information from WWW	12	26.09	1
6. Getting information from CD-Roms	5	10.87	5
7. Writing web pages	6	13.04	4

Twenty-six percent wanted to do the task involving getting information from WWW. About 20% wanted to e-mail their friends and 17% wanted to play games. These were the top three tasks. The rest were writing web pages (13.04%), practising English by using CALL programs (10.87%), and typing reports (2.17%), respectively.

The next question asked in the questionnaire is "Should the tasks be graded?" About 56% said that they wanted their tasks to be graded whereas 44% percent did not. As regards the last question, "If graded, what is the appropriate score?," Table 6 presents the students' points of view in this aspect.

Table 6
Students' Points of View on the Scores of the Tasks

Scores	N	%
1. Five	1	6.25
2. Ten	2	12.50
3. Fifteen	3	18.75
4. Twenty	8	50.00
5. Thirty	2	12.50

The appropriate score for the assigned tasks seemed to be twenty. The next one was fifteen. This may depend on the number of tasks given.

Even though the questionnaire was given to a group of Economic students, the results yielded the following fruitful information for language teachers who want to include computer tasks in their language teaching.

1. First-year Economic students at Chulalongkorn University know how to use the computer. Seventy-nine percent of an English class know how to use it so the majority of the students may not have problems if the teacher wants to add computer tasks to the language class.

2. Most of the Economic students used the computer to type their reports (30.77%), play games (28.21%) and get information from WWW (20.51%). Only three percent used CALL programs to practise English. This indicates that the use of computer in English classes is low.

3. The first-year Economic students examined in this study did not reject the use of computer in their English class. They showed interest in using it to practise the four language skills although the percentage was not high.

4. The students preferred pair-work and group-work activities to individual work. Group-work activities were ranked first while none of the students chose individual work.

5. The majority of the students wanted to do three computer tasks (47.62%). The second rank was two tasks (28.57%).

6. The top three preferable computer tasks were 1) getting information from WWW, 2) sending e-mail, and 3) playing games.

7. Whether the tasks should be graded is debatable because 56% wanted them to be graded while the rest did not. If graded, the total score of the assigned tasks should count as 20% of the total grade.

After this information was obtained, the tasks that can combine language skills, academic and cognitive abilities, computer literacy and self-actualization needs of the

students were investigated. There are many activities that language teachers can employ in their English classes. However, the selected tasks reviewed below focus on Distance Education tasks since these projects are geared towards self-directed learning and correspond with the students' needs, abilities and interests. They are:

1. The Cities Project
2. English Through Internet
3. The Content-Based Approach to Internet Literacy

Regarding the first project, "The Cities Project" has been designed for high intermediate/advanced English level students. The writing requirement is minimum, only one e-mail entry per week. In the project, students work together within their class and with students in other classes from cities around the world. They explore different aspects of the society in which they live and share the information with their partners overseas. The students communicate mainly via e-mail although collections of artifacts from each city can be sent through snailmail. Video and discussion on specific topics are encouraged. At the end of the task, a final "cities" project is presented by each group consisting of students from each of the cities.

Hess (1998:1) mentioned that the project could benefit the students in the following aspects:

1. Students venture out and learn about their city.

2. Students learn about other places of interest, which increases their interest in the interaction between the classes.

3. Within structured writing options, students are free to write on whatever interests them.

4. Students (studnets?) learn Internet communication and researching skills and develop an awareness of how they can benefit from using the Internet in their lives.

The second example, "English Through Internet," is given by Mofet Institute in Israel. It is a special virtual course which aims to teach the Internet and at the same time improve reading and writing skills. The students have to complete assignments with different partners or key pals. The course is divided into a number of modules. Each module teaches a different aspect of the Internet and practices reading and writing skills at the same time. There are teaching notes for each module and extra readings. The course is a distance learning course which involves whole classes who work with their teachers in the classroom and with peers, instructors and mentors through the Internet.

The last example, "The Content-Based Approach to Internet Literacy," is proposed by Ward and Karet (1996) who suggest the use of the Internet to increase language proficiency through the content-based approach. According to this method, language learning is contextualized and purposeful because the student uses the language to pursue a specific goal and simultaneously acquires the language. He can gain mastery of the language

(procedural knowledge) as well as mastery of the subject (declarative knowledge) at the same time. The writers propose that the World Wide Web is an ideal teaching tool for any academic discipline since it gives opportunities for both procedural and declarative learning. The WWW provides a lot of comprehensible input while features of the Internet can facilitate and enhance learning.

The afore-mentioned examples correspond with the results from the questionnaire in that the students wanted to get information from the WWW and send e-mail in their preferable tasks. Although the Internet has many advantages, there are some drawbacks. The most serious one is its heavy traffic. An Intranet, an alternative to the Internet seems to help solve the problem. Weinstein (1996:50) pointed out the difference between the Internet and an Intranet, namely, "while the Internet is global in scope, open to everyone with no regard to content, an Intranet serves a well-defined and bounded user community." Similar to the Internet, an Intranet's main function is to read and display Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML) files created by the teacher and student. E-mail and interactive programs are also functions of some Intranets.

Weinstein has tried Intranet pedagogy at Brookside School Upper Campus (Brooknet) and found many positive feedback. For example, individual class home pages have

helped create a sense of classroom community. The Intranet makes it easier for teachers to share academic units, projects, and curriculum ideas. Hot links to the Internet make the teachers more efficient. Besides, an Intranet allows for individualism and creativity. Storing multimedia student portfolios is also possible.

To make certain that the students can enhance their language skills, cognitive and academic abilities, Internet communication, as well as self-actualization needs, the teacher needs to learn about the students' computer background, language abilities, and their needs and interests. To ensure the students' responsibility and commitment to the tasks, the teacher should use the information from the questionnaire to provide a contract specifying desirable objectives: what they will do and how they are going to be evaluated. The students can learn how to survive in the new millennium and accomplish their individual goals in language learning at the same time.

In conclusion, Self-Directed Learning through the Internet and Intranet Pedagogy may be an alternative for language teachers who believe in the philosophy of self-directed learning, language acquisition and application of IT in language teaching because it offers choices in objectives, rate, content and place of learning.

The Author

Dr. Kanchana Prapphal is Professor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI). She received a Bachelor of Arts with honors from Chulalongkorn University and a Master of Arts in English as a Second Language from the University of Hawaii where she studied on an East-West Center Grant. She was awarded a scholarship from Chulalongkorn University to study for a Doctor of Philosophy in Education at the University of New Mexico. She has been Director of CULI since 1996. Her main interests are language testing, classroom-centered research and applications of IT in language teaching.

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