Criteria for the Evaluation of Websites for the Teaching of English as a Second Language. Web Supported English Learning in Greece

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Abstract
The use of the internet in education is an indispensable tool. It is easily accessible and modified according to the needs of the students. This paper deals with the use of web-enhanced teaching of the English language in Greece. More specifically, the influence of the internet on information issues, the didactics and pedagogic material with regard to the foreign language is examined. Since there is not a great number of language learning Web sites designed for the particular needs of Greek students learning the English language, it is difficult for both teachers and students to choose websites that match their needs and interests. The situation raises a need for a Web evaluation system which can help them find and assess Web resources effectively. The present study is concerned with assessment and evaluation of ESL websites as resources for students. For this purpose, the students work individually to review and evaluate ESL websites. The primary target of the evaluation is to provide information about how the ESL websites will help improve a learner's proficiency in the target language. The students are prompted to consider what the sites may offer by means of pedagogic possibilities, teaching methods and learning potential as well as technical issues. In their evaluations, the students are encouraged to recognize both technical considerations and concentrate on what the sites offer in terms of pedagogic possibilities, classroom methods as well as learning prospects.

Key words: web evaluation, criteria, web-enhanced learning, ESL.

1. Introduction
Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was initially introduced at 1960's, and there are numerous studies concerning the evaluation of CALL software programs and the effectiveness of CALL as a whole. The World-Wide Web (WWW) is a relatively new tool in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). There are many online tools for teaching languages, and many websites have been created solely for hosting them. However, there is little concern so far about evaluating websites for language teaching. When new technologies, such as the WWW, are introduced in the classroom, its users must know their prospects and limitations. To ensure effective and appropriate use of technology for education one needs to adopt evaluation systems for computers, software, and activities. Systems for the evaluation of educational software have been produced (e.g., Hunt 1993), as well as at least one system for the evaluation of English as a Second Language (ESL) Internet Activities [1]. However, few systems have been designed specifically for the evaluation of Web language-learning materials. Therefore, there is a need for specifying an evaluation system for Web-based material, in order for the actors to easily and effectively assess its quality. Pedagogical theories and evaluation criteria for online material are for sure closely related. For this, one should be aware of research studies [2], [3], [4], [5] which provide the basic principles for the construction and the evaluation of Web-based material.

2. Research focus
The present study is concerned with assessment and evaluation of ESL websites as resources for students. For this purpose, the students work individually to review and evaluate ESL websites. The students have input from the language instructor and assess some examples of ESL website evaluation carried out previously [6]. The website evaluation task is an individual assignment which builds on collaborative analysis further conducted in the classroom. The assessment is conducted in the context of learning theories with constructivist elements. The primary target of the evaluation is to provide information about how the ESL websites will help to improve a learner’s proficiency in the target language. The students are prompted to consider what the sites may offer by means of
pedagogic possibilities, teaching methods and learning potential as well as technical issues. According to Trochim [7] during the implementation and evaluation stage it is possible to assess users’ reaction to the content and examine the usability of a site. To evaluate the students use certain categories that exist for CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) software such as pedagogical, curricular and technical considerations, user interface [8] as well as website evaluation [9],[10], [11], [12].

3. Research methodology
This study was focused on the following axes:
- A pilot sample of four ELT websites (Table1)
- Classification of the ELT websites (Table 2)
- Possible criteria for the evaluation of websites for the learning or teaching of the English language
The websites selected for this study are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Websites</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Council-Learn English Central</td>
<td><a href="http://www.britishcouncillearnenglishcentral.gr">http://www.britishcouncillearnenglishcentral.gr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PALSO (Federation of Owners of Centres of Foreign Languages)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.Palso.gr">http://www.Palso.gr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td><a href="http://www.BBC.co.uk">http://www.BBC.co.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mingonville</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mingoville.com/gr">http://www.mingoville.com/gr</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Evaluation Criteria
The ESL evaluation relates to technical, affective and pedagogical factors that affect learning. The underlying theory behind the evaluation is based on well-established website evaluation criteria with the aim of identifying the students’ perception of web –based ESL learning.

The evaluation criteria used in the present study are depicted in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part A</th>
<th>Part B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Purpose (Informative/Communicative/Educative)</td>
<td>• The students’ satisfaction concerning web-enhanced ESL (English as a Second Language) learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pedagogy (Teaching Methods – Procedure)</td>
<td>• The students’ opinion of the existing methods of teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Skills taught (Reading – Speaking – Listening – Writing – Vocabulary – Grammar - Pronunciation)</td>
<td>• Their opinion regarding the appropriateness of the websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Level (Beginner – Intermediate – Advanced - Multiple )</td>
<td>• Students’ intention to use websites for self-study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Content (Educational Objectives - Quality of Information)</td>
<td>• Their intention to explore more websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evaluation (Progress Report)</td>
<td>• The technical hitches that they encountered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Design / Construction (Interface, Technical Requirements)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Data collection instrument
A group of randomly selected university students, enrolled in intermediate to upper intermediate EFL classes were introduced to four websites and instructed to use them for homework assignment and for self-study respectively. First, the students were introduced to these websites and were allowed to try out a few activities. Directions for accessing the sites were handed out. Students then worked on the sites on their own in their mainstream classroom or, if they had a computer, at home. The students
were asked to practice a skill for homework and do the same again quickly in class the next day. In some cases the information on a site had to be modified for English language learners (e.g. translation of website contents) as some of the sites were not suitable for their level. The data was collected by using a questionnaire. There were 14 items grouped under three parts in the questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire were prepared based on the objectives of the present study. Following the first section requiring some demographic information, such as students’ level and gender, in the next two sections, the subjects were asked to evaluate the websites based on ESL evaluation criteria listed in Part A as well as express their beliefs, attitudes and expectations about the effectiveness of using ESL websites in the classroom listed in Part B. A five-point Likert scale was used in the second part. The options ranged and 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree) in the scale of the second part. A descriptive statistic using frequency count and mean score was used in the data analysis in the first part.

6. Findings
Regarding the evaluation of the pedagogy of the websites selected, the results are depicted in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Evaluation of the pedagogy](image)

One can easily notice that Website B has the lowest score on all evaluation criteria, while the rest of the Websites share relatively the same scores. Additionally, the content of the websites were compared, resulting to Figure 2. Again, Website B has the lowest scores, while Website A presents the higher scores.

7. Conclusion
Evaluating English learning websites for ESL students is important, not only in terms of appropriate content and pedagogy, but also in terms of what skills the websites are teaching or reinforcing. Sites that are too mundane will not challenge the student, but sites that are too elaborate may overwhelm the student. Another issue is that it would be easy to criticise the evaluations as inexpert as they were carried out by students. A realistic interpretation of this type of evaluation is to acknowledge it as evidence that the students are beginning the process of thinking critically about ESL websites and view their responses to as teaching resources.

References


