BUILDING A READING WEBSITE FOR EFL/ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper is a brief overview of how a reading website was developed for L2 learners and teachers. The authors begin by explaining how the need for a reading website became evident before discussing the development of criteria that were used to create materials for the site. The authors then show how and why the site was designed and developed in a way that would be responsive to learner and teacher needs. Some of the challenges of designing the website and implementing their ideas are discussed. Finally, the initial online feedback about the site is briefly discussed as an early indicator of the site's success. The conclusion indicates that despite the growing access to technology, it is still quite difficult to develop materials and present them in a way that is helpful and easy for learners to access.

1 Introduction

Although there are extensive online resources for learners who wish to practice many L2 skills, there are few websites that offer learners and teachers free academic quality reading materials for learning and test practice. The authors developed the idea for a reading website that offers free materials based on established academic criteria and which offers graded readings that allow for classroom or independent study. After the materials were written and tested with learners, they designed a website based around L2 reading development theory that was both free to access and easy for learners and teachers to use. The site is currently in its early stages of operation but initial feedback has been encouraging.

2 Background

The authors first developed the idea of creating an online L2 reading resource for learners and teachers in the fall of 2012 when they were assigned the task of developing a comprehensive 15 week reading course in a limited amount of time. Although a reading textbook was provided for the course, the materials in the book were insufficient to cover the breadth of the course schedule. Due to the expense of the existing mandated course textbook, it was unreasonable to expect that learners in the course should be forced to pay for a second textbook to resolve these issues.

Consequently, the authors were forced to look elsewhere for supplemental reading materials that could be used in class.

With the start of the course imminent, the authors searched online for reading materials that were suitable for their learners. However, much of the available materials were not available without charge or were of dubious quality. A limited amount of free materials were available on various English testing sites but these were not enough to fill the gaps left open in the course syllabus.

The lack of online reading material for EFL teachers and learners was particularly surprising as some research has suggested that the use computers technology has several benefits in the classroom such as reports of increased motivation by learners and overall positive perceptions of their use (Lim, 2006).

2.1 Filling the gap

With few options left, the authors decided to create their own materials for the course. Because the syllabus required a graded reading approach, they needed to develop criteria upon which each reading would be based. Five levels of readings were established which were meant to be progressively challenging for a reader in terms of length, vocabulary, and grammar. The use of a graded reading approach for learning has also been found useful for learners as a means of vocabulary acquisition and the learning of linguistic models (Hafiz, 1990) so this approach seemed to hold promise as a useful guide for development of readings for the website.

The authors turned to existing academic standards in the field that would most suit their learners. Although there has been some debate in the past over the validity of using certain criteria for readability, (see Brown, 1998) it has been convincingly argued that existing readability formulas are, in fact, valid (Greenfield, 2004). In the authors' case, they were both teaching mostly Japanese students at a Japanese university. As a result, the JACET 8000 Word List was used to determine the vocabulary words that would be used and tested in each reading. Recognizing that the overall use of grammar and the readability of each reading needed to be accounted for, they used the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Scale to properly calibrate each reading to the intended reading level.

The authors also considered how the questions for each difficulty level should be designed so as to give beginner level learners more practice in fundamental vocabulary-type questions present on tests such as TOEFL. As learners progress through the five skill levels, they are gradually introduced to more question types that require deeper comprehension of the material as well as background knowledge. In the more advanced levels of the readings, the learners are provided with questions that relate to the main ideas of paragraphs, prediction of content in subsequent paragraphs, and the implications of words and phrases.

2.2 Creating and testing the readings

The authors first attempted to adapt existing articles on the Internet from sources like Wikipedia to suit their criteria by changing vocabulary words, simplifying sentences, and writing details that would help supplement background knowledge. It soon became evident, however, that these articles were already too complex for most learners and that using these articles for research

purposes and then writing original materials was, in fact, easier than attempting to alter existing articles intended for a native speaker. An unforeseen benefit of writing original content was that information and facts from many different sources could be used to make for more interesting and engaging content, which could help motivate learners to read.

Over the course of the semester, the authors wrote 60 original articles and used them in class with a good deal of success measured by learner feedback, quiz scores, and overall enthusiasm for in-class reading. The authors used these to further refine their criteria and content to suit their learners reading abilities and preferences. By the end of the semester, they had settled on a firm set of criteria for developing new readings.

Table 1. Criteria for reading lesson development across levels

Level	Word Count	Jacet 8000 level	Question Types	Flesch Kincaid Grade level
Advanced	Approx. 500	6	Stated Detail / Main Idea / Vocabulary / Pronoun / Prediction / Implied / Unstated	11+
Higher Intermediate	Approx. 400	5	Stated Detail / Main Idea / Vocabulary / Pronoun / Prediction	10+
Intermediate	Approx. 300	4	Stated Detail / Main Idea / Vocabulary / Pronoun	9+
Lower Intermediate	Approx 250.	3	Stated Detail / Main Idea / Vocabulary	8+
Beginner	Approx 200.	2	Stated Detail / Main Idea	7+

2.3 Going online: The creation of dreamreader.net

Having spent a semester developing and testing their readings, the authors decided to use the same criteria to create a set of new materials to share online with other teachers and learners. These materials would again consist of original content and would be provided as a free resource. Over the course of 20 months, the authors wrote nearly 200 articles across five levels of difficulty from beginner to advanced level. This was deemed a sufficient number of readings for any teacher or learner who needed to use the articles for classroom learning or independent study. The authors also attempted to make the articles and quizzes available as a PDF file so that students could study offline and teachers could print the material and distribute it in their classes. This supplemental content, which will be discussed later, would make it easier for learners and teachers to access the materials and use them as a valuable learning resource. It also takes into

account the preferences that some learners may have towards reading paper-based materials rather than online articles (see Tseng, 2010, for example).

The next step in this process was to create the actual online presence for the readings by designing a website that was easy for teachers and learners to navigate and use as a valuable teaching and learning resource. In February 2014, the authors used a domain provider called godaddy.com to buy a reasonably priced domain for the site, which was dreamreader.net. After that, they purchased a low-cost hosting package from inmotionhosting.com to host the website. The challenge they faced next was to design a responsive website that would be as simple as possible for learners and teachers to use and access the reading materials.

3 Site design

3.1 Meeting the needs of learners

The website's purpose is to provide English language learners with a way to practice and improve their English reading ability, especially in regard to understanding textual content presented in TOEFL-style tests. The learner accesses the site through the front page where they can select an article they wish to read based on topic and difficulty level. They are then taken to a new web page that displays the article's text, an audio recording of the article's contents, a downloadable vocabulary worksheet in PDF format, and a short quiz underneath it.

The purpose of providing these materials in an optional printable format is to allow the learner to study the article's contents even while offline and to accommodate learners who may find reading from a computer screen to be difficult. By having an audio recording available for download, this allows learners to listen to the pronunciation of certain words and spoken rhythm. A learner could also use the audio file to turn a reading activity into a listening task, which allows them to develop a different skill. The vocabulary worksheet enables learners who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of certain words and their relationship to other words (such as definitions, synonyms, and antonyms) in each article. The learner can check their understanding of the reading by taking a short quiz located underneath the text of the article. When the learner submits their quiz answers, a new window appears that tells the user their score and shows them correct and incorrect answers. The learner is then free to read the article and attempt the quiz again or they can access another article on the website.

The website is free to access and use with no requirements in terms of registration or other commitment. We believed that making all of the website's content freely available would make the site more appealing and potentially broaden our user base. We also understood that charging users to access the website's content would be problematic for many learners, for whom the cost of paying even a relatively small fee might be prohibitive.

3.2 Assumptions about site use patterns and design

Our site design was based on a number of assumptions about what the users wanted to do when they visited the website, the kind of content they wanted to access, and the way that learners would use the site over time as a study tool. Our foremost assumption was that visitors to the website would want to quickly and easily access the articles. Secondly, we thought that users

coming to the website would want to study content that matched their current English reading level ability and their interests. Finally, we supposed that some learners would make repeated visits to the website in an effort to practice and improve their reading ability over a period of time rather than visit only one time and attempt to do all of the available readings. With these assumptions in mind, we chose to build a website that had as few page layers as possible between the front page and the main content, while still giving users a way to access content that was new and matched to their reading ability.

The front page provides users with a way to access all reading content by clicking on a prominently-displayed button according to their self-assigned skill level. The user is then taken to a new page where they are provided with a list of topics that can be expanded to show all of the related articles in that skill level. Clicking on the "View Lesson" button next to an article takes the user to a new page that displays their chosen article.

Fig. 1. The homepage for dreamreader.net

Another way that users can reach site content is to simply click on a rotating image or the text on the front page. The rotating images are matched to a new article headline, which takes the user immediately to the chosen article. We decided that having a front page that places prominence on images rather than text would make the site less intimidating for new users, who might feel overwhelmed and uncertain of what to do if the front page presented the learner with too many choices presented by heavy text with many different links. The decision to have the images rotate was a deliberate attempt to keep the front page uncluttered and to keep the user from feeling confused by having too many ambiguous options. By featuring new articles on the front page, this also gives repeat visitors a way to immediately find and access new content at a glance rather than having to navigate to the category page and look through various topics in an effort to find updated materials.

3.3 Design implementation and site development

Since the content and design of our site needed to suit a specific audience with certain needs, we decided to use a flexible and customizable software package for our website called WordPress. WordPress is a powerful open-source content system that offers site administrators many options in terms of site functionality and presentation. WordPress administrators can easily customize how a site looks and works in an administrative control panel. WordPress also offers "themes" that change how items are displayed on a site to suit a website's purpose and "plug-ins" can be easily installed that add certain features and functions to the site (such as quizzes or audio features). However, because our website's parameters were outside the normal scope of most WordPress users, the existing software themes and plugins did not suitably address our needs. Consequently, we hired a web design and development company called "Elto" to install and customize a WordPress theme and plugins to build the website to our specifications.

Despite our desire to provide a simple interface for our website visitors, the process of creating and implementing it proved to be quite challenging in many ways. There were significant technical demands involved with creating a rotating image on the front page, providing expandable lists of topics within each skill category, and giving users feedback after submitting a quiz. Through "Elto", we hired a project manager and a developer to implement these features. The developers were often able to carry out our wishes to a certain degree of satisfaction but there were also some notable miscommunications that led to erroneous assumptions and implementations that had to be revised or redone to better suit the aims of our project.

As work continued on the website over a period of six months, it became clear that good communication with the web development team was a crucial component of driving the website's development in a positive direction. As we provided more details about the website as well as graphical mock-ups to show how we wanted certain pages to appear, the development team was able to better implement our desired features and functions with fewer errors until the website finally met with our initial design objectives. During this process, we learned more about how our requests translated into technical jargon, which helped us to better explain our wishes to the developers in a more specific way. By the end of the initial development period in June 2014, communication between ourselves and the web developers was much smoother and we were able to see significant satisfactory progress being made.

Another issue with the development of the site was that each change we requested was addressed by a different developer and this resulted in having to explain our website design objectives to each new developer with varying degrees of success. Some developers were unaware of what the previous developer had done, which resulted in much confusion at times and some concerns about whether a certain change was feasible in light of these previous changes. By the end of the initial stages of the project, we found that asking for one specific web developer to work on all of our requested changes resulted in substantially better communication and implementation of our requested website changes.

The site is still in its very early stages of operation so it is unclear whether or not it will be successful in terms of earning and maintaining a healthy user base. As of this writing, we are still trying to develop a clear picture of how the website is being used by its visitors. Initial feedback

from teachers and learners who have visited the site has been very positive and the site gained some attention from prominent English language bloggers, who have praised it online. In the first two weeks of the site's initial launch, it served roughly 1500 visitors from 81 different countries. Although this has been a very encouraging sign of the site's viability and usefulness, we would need a larger user base to gain a more coherent perspective on this kind of information.

In order to help learners in their attempts to increase their English reading ability, we have considered possible future upgrades to the site. For example, it may be helpful to add a feature that allows a user to track their progression through the various articles and view a record of their scores on each quiz. Currently, the only feedback given on the site is on individual quiz scores after completing a quiz so such a new feature would give a learner a look at the "bigger picture" of their reading strengths and weaknesses as a whole. In order to implement these kinds of changes and integrate them with the current website, however, we would need to once again carefully design and effectively communicate with a web developer.

4 Conclusions

New technology allows for the diffusion of knowledge in new forms and can provide ready access to educational materials for people without the time or money to easily purchase it. By providing unrestricted access to language learning materials for people around the world, dreamreader.net has the potential to help address barriers to education created by poverty. It may also assist teachers who are pressed for time or ideas in a reading class or who do not have access to sufficient textbook materials.

The growth of software packages and blogging tools in recent years has allowed increasing numbers of teachers to share lesson ideas, plans, and activities. It is still a challenging task to design and create a customized website that allows for easy access to them. This may help to explain why it is not always easy for teachers and students to find a repository of high quality learning materials available online without charge.

Although the website may not yet provide for the kind of interactionist learning-style proposed by current CALL proponents (such as Chapelle, 2005), there is the potential for this kind of learning to occur in later iterations of the website. Task-oriented flash activities may allow for users to do more than simply read the articles for each lesson but also to interact with the text itself to create meaning.

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