

# The Internet and Differentiation

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**For most teachers today, the Internet is not something special or new. Indeed, for many new teachers and all of their students, there has never been a time when there wasn't an Internet. Unfortunately, the pedagogy to fully exploit this exciting medium in the classroom, has lagged behind our skill at manipulating the technology. We are still applying traditional approaches to computer work-linear approaches. In other words, we are using analog thinking in a digital world.**

A quick overview of the most common electronic applications in EFL reveal that information and teaching frameworks are frequently being simply transferred from print to the digital world. For example, we now have the choice of photocopyable or downloadable worksheets. This is a good thing. There are a lot of advantages to putting print materials online- online materials don't bend or rip and you can store virtually thousands of worksheets and lesson plans on a disc the size of a matchbox. However, ultimately, these kind of digital resources are really meant to be used when printed out. The computer in this case is simply a storage facility. Of course, students can go online and fill out worksheets. It is also extremely easy to create online tests, (multiple choice, cloze etc.) with flashy graphics and new options such as drag and drop. Again, all of these things are helpful and can make a teachers' life easier and a student's job more fun. Nevertheless, the work the students are doing here makes use of the computer primarily as a typewriter or an input device and not as something dynamic.

If this were the only kind of benefit students and teachers could derive from computer/internet based work, then we could legitimately ask the question "Why bother", when we are faced with limited resources.

One very tangible way the Internet can make a difference in your teaching is by providing opportunities for differentiation. Assuming that Internet tasks are appropriately integrated into the entire classroom experience and not seen as "extras", they can make an important contribution to addressing the multiple learning styles in your classroom. However, in order to exploit these possibilities we need to have a conceptual compass which helps us identify teaching opportunities and brings a semblance of order to the chaotic and steadily evolving world of the net

## A model for using the Internet

While there are many theories of technology integration, few address the specific needs of the language classroom. Of these, even fewer look at the needs of young learners. Without a model, the Internet can be a confusing jumble, with no beginning or end, up or down. In an effort to put some order into this potential "chaos", I have identified three core instructional categories for Internet use in the language classroom.

- 1) Communication
- 2) Searching for Information
- 3) Producing content for the internet

Communication relates to the use of E-mails, chats and video conferencing allowing for "real conversation"- language in action. Searching for information normally requires the use of a web browser. However, when getting started with the children, you may choose to give them a list of pre-selected web addresses to choose from.

Once the children feel confident in the WWW environment they can begin producing their own content. Luckily, basic web authoring has become quite easy through automated programs, which do not even require knowledge of html code. In fact, in many ways, web authoring is an easier task for young learners of English than searching, since you, the teacher can design the task to fit your students' level. Multimedia (audio, video, photos, animation) pep up any project and are a strong motivation for students.

## Technology and Differentiation

Each student has his or her own unique combination of learning styles. These learning styles are the result of inherent preferences as well as social, cultural, and gender factors. In his work on Multiple Intelligence theory, Howard Gardner identifies eight intelligences that everyone shares. Effective teaching speaks to the dominant intelligences of the students. Since each student has a different mixture of intelligences, learning activities must be as diverse as the class itself. Multimedia and the Internet provide countless opportunities to address varied learning styles (visual, musical, logical, interpersonal, interpersonal) within the individual classroom. Educators have identified three distinct aspects of instruction that can be differentiated :

- Content
- Process
- Product

Let's take a look at some examples of Internet differentiation

# Content Differentiation

## Working with Stories

Working with multiple media to tell stories is nothing new to EFL. Pictures, flashcards, audio CD's, films - all these resources are available without even flicking on a computer switch. What makes the Internet experience so interesting is that all these components can be integrated and made available in one place. With the computer you can:

- read text from the screen or a print-out.
- work with:
  - words plus audio.
  - words and pictures
  - audio and pictures.
  - animation
  - video

Without the computer you would need at least, a CD player, DVD player and the print books themselves.

## Working with Websites

Many teachers have told me that they shy away from working with authentic English-language websites because they think the language will be too hard for the students to understand. While many sites do appear rather daunting and filled with an almost inconceivable amount of information, a careful study of their structure reveals that there is normally lots for students to do at all language levels. The key is to set precise tasks.

As an example, let's look at the website for the National Football League of the United States.



A study of the site shows that the key information can be found in the six headers in blue at the center of the page: *scores, stats (statistics), schedules, standings, teams, players*. Once you make this architecture clear to the students, you can pretty much ignore the rest of the site.

For beginners you can begin with simple identification activities. Point to the team symbols and have the students find the matching team. You can then move on to having the students identify which players play for each team. In the process you can work on simple yes/no questions.

For slightly more advanced students, you can click on schedules. This button will give you dates of games. Here you can practice days of the week, months of the year and time. In addition you can work with the future: "The Giants are playing the Redskins on March 6." as well as the past, "The Cowboys and Lions played on December 18."

Moving from schedules you can take a further step up in both linguistic and cognitive difficulty by clicking either the standings or stats buttons. Looking at the standings, students can perform basic mathematical computations. They can also practice comparatives and for particularly strong classes even make predictions: "The Lions are three points behind the Browns. Next week they play the Patriots. If they win and the Browns lose, they will be in first place."

It is truly remarkable to see how engaged students get in working with this data. It needn't be the NFL website. Any site focusing on a sports league (the Premiership in England, the Champions League, the NBA) can fit the bill. In fact, there is no reason you couldn't work with a website in the students native language, such as there national league site, and ask the students to analyze and report the information in English.

## Process Differentiation

Perhaps the single most important change the Internet has brought to the classroom is the liberation of information and knowledge. In the “old world”, knowledge was catalogued and linear. Like a table of contents you moved predictably from one level of knowledge to another. With the Internet this has all changed. Today, information is neither set nor finite. Knowledge is constantly expanding and changing. New hyper-linked environments are fluid and transitory and each time we go online we influence the structure of this knowledge a little bit. Each search we do is unique and the criteria we use is a reflection of how we think. In fact, Internet searches are the ultimate examples of differentiated learning.

The dissolution of knowledge hierarchies provides great opportunities for autonomous learning. Students can freely associate and explore, furthering discovery learning. On the other hand, this very freedom is fraught with potential danger. The Internet is not edited. Nobody checks websites for their factual correctness (let alone their political or social appropriateness). This puts a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of the students and, of course, on us as teachers.

With young learners we cannot simply have our students move aimlessly through the web. We have to set limits. One way to set limits is to install filters on the Internet computers. This isn't as foolproof as it may seem, however. The other option is to give the students a list of websites to explore and limit them to these choices. Rather than filtering the search, you are reducing the databank. Many mainstream teachers also weave these website suggestions into web-based lesson plans - or *webquests*.

There are not many *webquests* for language learning on the Internet. Most webquests are content-oriented - science, social studies, math etc. However, with the growth of content-based EFL and CLIL, there is a great opportunity to create “leveled” webquests for the language classroom, where language is scaffolded for different learners.

## Product Differentiation

In discussing stories above, we talked about the advantages of having a host of multimedia opportunities at our disposal in one place. This doesn't only apply to passive viewing. The same can be

said of our ability to create content. There are huge possibilities for students to be creative in presenting their work electronically. But again, as with searches, this richness and flexibility requires mature choices. This isn't easy given the fun and infectious “bells and whistles” multi-media offers. It is important to make clear that despite a tool's “coolness”, it is only valuable inasmuch as it supports the goals of the activity.

I can remember my first acquaintance with a Powerpoint presentation in the early 1990s. I was sitting in a business meeting looking at ohps full of boring numbers when suddenly I heard a loud sound like a bullet being fired. I looked up and saw a number moving across the screen to its allotted place in a table. A second later there was a screech and another number appeared, this time spinning from the top right of the screen to the centre. Numbers and sounds came flying from all directions. By the end of the presentation we didn't have a clue what the presentation was about.

Now this is, of course, an exaggerated example, but if you remember that this was a businessman that created such a monster, just imagine what young children or teens will do if they get the chance. The point here is always to keep your ultimate goal in mind. *Why are you creating this content? How will it illustrate learning and become part of the learning process?* Of course there is a time and place for students to work on designing a webpage or presentation. It is a motivation. Nevertheless, considering the limited contact time we have with students in most cases, it seems prudent to try and focus as much of our efforts on activities which encourage the use of the target language.

This isn't difficult to do. There are diverse roles to be performed in creating content. If you are making a website you need:

- writers
- editors
- proof writers
- formatters
- administrators

Each of these roles can yield rich language if the activity is designed carefully. The language input can also be modified for different language levels by modifying the product involved, as the following example from *Internet and Young Learners*

### ***The E-lympics (basic version)***

Goal: To compare results of a competition

Language: Comparatives, superlatives, simple past, numbers...

Level: elementary and up. The language can be adjusted to the learning level of the group.

Age: 8 and up

Time: Ongoing

Procedure:

1. Introduce the subject of the Olympic Games to your class. Ask them what kind of sports are played at the Olympics. Make a list of these sports.
2. Hand out the “E”lympics worksheet. Explain to the children that you are going to hold an “E”lympics at school and the partner schools are going to do the same.
3. Play the “E”lympics events. If possible take photos with a digital camera.
4. Record the results of the events on the worksheet and send the sheet and the photos to your partner schools.
5. As the partner schools send in their results, record them on a master worksheet.