

LEARNING ENGLISH WITH THE INTERNET: A DIGITAL SYLLABUS OF STORIES FOR SPANISH YOUNG LEARNERS

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Introduction

Web sites for children, if appropriately selected and organised, can offer a range of opportunities to develop foreign language (henceforth, FL) proficiency in a playful and enjoyable context (cf. Wright & Shade, 1994; Van Scoter, Ellis & Railsback, 2001). Multimedia applications for FL learning can map a more realistic picture of the new language and culture into the classroom including not only linguistic but also paralinguistic features such as body language, gestures, prosody, etc. which help to convey meaning to the learners (cf. Brett, 1995; Fidelman, 1997; Gassin, 1992; Hurley, 1992).

However, while language teachers are progressively aware of the potential benefits of technology in FL instruction, one challenge

they face is how to implement effective technology-based language tasks. Many professionals feel uncertain on how to take advantage of the Web to bring part of the world into the FL classroom, especially when working with young learners. FL teachers are often overwhelmed by a large quantity of sites and materials which often exceed the linguistic level and the technological abilities of their students. Deciding how to use and integrate systematically those materials within a more traditional methodology demands an extra effort many full-time teachers cannot afford.

This article's main aim is to present teachers a proposal of an Internet-based syllabus for young learners to be integrated in their English as a Foreign Language (henceforth, EFL) curriculum. The present syllabus was designed to support and develop the common objectives, contents and skills worked on by six year old children in any primary school in Spain, according with the Spanish Law of Education (LOCE, available at: <http://sid.usal.es/idoocs/F3/LYN6125/3-6125.pdf>). At this age, Spanish children officially initiate their EFL instruction at schools and start reading and writing in their L1, which facilitates the acquisition of these skills in L2 as well (cf. Brumfit et al., 1994). LOCE specifically encourages the use of ICTs in the Primary classroom as a learning tool and pursues the comprehension of oral messages and the identification and reproduction of English most common features of intonation and pronunciation, among the most important objectives to be achieved by young learners.

The source of the digital materials that integrate the present syllabus is the *Kindersite* Project (www.kindersite.org), an international project based Internet site, hosted in the UK, with the global objective of providing free access to primary schools around the world to good graded educational and entertainment content as an aid to an early introduction to EFL, in a safe and secure environment. *Kindersite* offers hundreds of direct links to graded content in the form of games, songs and stories that teachers and children can use in the primary English classroom, in a distance-learning scenario or freely by the children at home (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Display of Kindersite Project web site



The present Internet-based syllabus, which was elaborated within a larger research project aimed at studying the effects and effectiveness of Internet-based technology on children's linguistic outcome in EFL (Cf. Ramírez & Alonso, in press), is integrated with 225 selected activities extracted from *Kindersite*: 69 stories, 49 songs and 107 games. For the scope of this article, we will only present the main characteristics of the 69 selected digital stories that form part of the syllabus. If appropriately selected, digital stories can prove to be very useful in developing children's listening skills. They tend to be visual, interactive and iterative: usually, young learners have to listen to and understand simple instructions in order to proceed with the story by clicking on parts of the screen or the picture. The interactivity of Internet based stories facilitates scaffolding learning since children are, first, actively involved in decoding and understanding the story (cf. Donato, 1994). Secondly, students are allowed to proceed at their own pace which also affords a high level of individual control.

Since most digital stories at *Kindersite* are targeted at native young speakers of English, one of our main tasks was to select the most appropriate materials for non native young learners of English. Objective criteria such as the simplicity of grammar, vocabulary and narrative structure were taken into account to make the story predictable and facilitate comprehension. To test our choices, the present proposal of digital materials was applied and successfully validated by six primary teachers of EFL and 220 six year old children in six state schools in Madrid. These Primary schools

offer constructive, active, collaborative learner-centred pedagogies in FL in which teachers are seen as learning facilitators.

This article describes and illustrates the main characteristics of the Internet-based syllabus (section 1). In section 2, one of the selected digital stories extracted from *Kindersite* is presented and analysed, as representative of the whole set. Finally, section 3 presents some pedagogical considerations based on the teachers' viewpoints about the effects that the Internet based materials presented here exerted on the teaching/learning process in their FL classrooms.

Creating an Internet-based syllabus of digital stories: topics, notions & concepts and functions

As mentioned in the introduction, 69 digital stories were selected from *Kindersite* according to their degree of difficulty (adequate for 6 year old Spanish children) and to the main objectives and contents specified in the current Spanish Law of Primary Education. Stories were classified according to two main parameters: topics or major themes arranged in semantic groups, and notions and concepts such as actions, abilities, etc. (cf. *Cambridge Young Learners English Test*, 2003). The list of topics, notions, functions and concepts covered by the selected *Kindersite* digital stories is the following:

Topics		Notions & Concepts		Functions	
Animals	Illness	Abilities	Greetings	Apologizing	
Body	Mathematics	Actions	Requesting	Comparing	
Family	Places	Appearance	Questioning	Describing	
Fairy tales	Safety	Colours	Giving instructions	Narrating	
Food	Seasons	Feelings	Giving commands	Expressing feelings	
Friends	Sports	Numbers	Giving information	Expressing appraisal	
Games	Time	Size	Answering	Expressing likes & dislikes	
Home & House	Weather	Graphs & Phonics	Expressing ability		

Table 1: List of topics, notions & functions and concepts included in the Internet-based syllabus.

Besides, each digital story was characterised according to the language functions presented (i.e. narrating, following instructions, requesting, etc.), the main grammatical, lexical or phonetic points worked on, the language skills (i.e. listening) required from the student and also the required interface abilities (i.e. listen, watch and react by clicking on arrows; click on the arrows to follow the story; click on parts of picture, watch and listen, etc.). The analysis and classification of the digital stories was carried out with the help of an Access Data Base and was later edited and printed in the form of a booklet for the teachers participating in the project.

During the testing period of these digital stories in the primary context, EFL teachers connected to www.kindersite.org during their lessons, selected the specific digital stories placed them into a password protected personal page (*My Page*, within the *Kindersite* domain). The educator then sent students to *My Page* through granting access to his/her *My Page* so that children could work with Internet as part of the lesson.

To facilitate a better integration of the digital stories into the teaching practice, some pre- and post computer work was agreed and designed by both researchers and teachers. Pre-computer activities presented to the whole group were intended to activate prior knowledge about the topics and notions covered in the story. The aim of post-computer work was to reinforce language acquisition through pair work and peer-collaboration.

An example of digital story and tasks

Let us present here an example of an illustrated interactive digital story titled *The Missing Pencil* (BBC), which can be taken as representative of the kind of digital materials which integrate in the syllabus. "The Missing Pencil" tells the adventures of Micky Maker in search of his pencil (Figure 2):



Figure 2: Display of "The Missing Pencil".

This activity is represented in the Access Data Base provided to EFL teachers as follows:

The Missing Pencil	
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/laac/story/pencil/sounds.html	
Topics	Season (Autumn); Forest Animals
Notions & Concepts	Location; Colours
Functions	Finding an object; Expressing feelings, Understanding requests and commands
Grammar	Present and past tenses; Prepositions of place; Can you + Infinitive?
Language Skills	Listening
Required Interface Abilities	Listen, watch and react by clicking on objects

Table 2: Analysis and classification of a digital story: *The missing pencil*.

The animated pictures of "The Missing Pencil" immediately involve children in the development of the story and contribute to create curiosity leading to concentration. By catching their attention, the story motivates them to watch, listen, understand and react. As the story proceeds, children are asked to respond by clicking on certain

objects appearing on the screen. For example, the narrator asks learners to 'click on the tree to see what happens next' or to 'click on the pencil'. Thus, children learn to reply to specific speech functions (i.e. commands or requests):

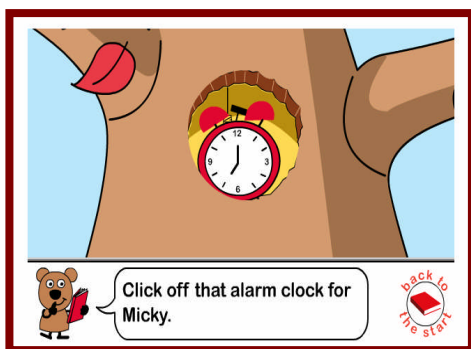


Figure 3: Display of "The Missing Pencil" pages.

By collaborating in the 'narration' of the story, learners can proceed at their own pace and become more autonomous in their learning, enabling teachers to monitor individual learning. Besides, the interactive and multi-sensory (integrating sound, animation of pictures and printed text) character of this digital story provides an immediate context which facilitates vocabulary learning.

In addition, oral language understanding, including pronunciation and prosody, is very much encouraged by this type of digital narratives which are especially relevant for non native young learners:



Figure 4: Display of "The Missing Pencil" pages

To facilitate the exploitation of this activity in the EFL Primary classroom, some pre and post computer tasks were designed. As pre-computer work, learners, for instance, reviewed vocabulary on colours, seasons, parts of the body, feelings, etc. through routine-like activities. Young learners, then, were taught to connect them with the new words (i.e. *wood animals, acorn*, etc) and phrases (i.e. *play a trick*) presented and worked out later on in the digital story.

Among the post-computer tasks designed for the exploitation of *The Missing Pencil*, young learners were asked to retell the story in different ways. For example, the teacher provided a prompt that the learners have to complete: *It was a cold autumn... [morning]*. Alternatively, the teacher guided the learners in narrating the story through the strategic use of interrogatives including alternative, yes/no or Wh- questions: *Micky can't find his pencil, he has lost it, is he happy or angry?*

To sum up, as "The Missing Pencil" shows, digital materials are enjoyable activities that guarantee a motivating suitable approach to language learning at an early age and promote EFL comprehension and learning. The digital content provided helps to supply all of those necessary requirements for a fruitful and enjoyable first experience into the foreign language.

Pedagogical considerations

In this article, we have briefly presented an Internet-based syllabus design for young learners. Our objective was to integrate this digital syllabus into the EFL Curriculum of Primary Education in Spain.

After the testing period of the above mentioned syllabus in six state schools in the region of Madrid, teachers who experimentally implemented it in their EFL lessons regarded our proposal very positively (cf. Ramírez & Alonso, in preparation). All interviewed teachers showed consensus on two facts: Internet-based materials could be fully integrated in the foreign language classroom; and Internet-based materials could improve L2 learning, especially vocabulary learning and oral understanding. Among the positive aspects of the integration of the syllabus in their teaching practice, they mentioned the importance of having access to real language, interesting stories and amusing activities. They believed that the use of technology was very motivating for learners and could promote

collaboration among them. They estimated that students had improved their global understanding of oral messages with the use of Internet materials. Finally, they mentioned that this improvement in listening comprehension had also benefited their pronunciation.

Some negative issues were also raised. Some interface difficulties and classroom management were mentioned: "It has taken a while until they have been able to use the web autonomously", "children select other links", "in some stories there is no possibility of rereading the previous page" or "it is not easy to deal with 20 children working with the computer at the same time". In general, the level of the language in some of the internet materials available nowadays is complex for young FL learners. Besides, the story-telling pace in some cases is too rapid even for native children. Among the suggestions some teachers made, they express their desire to further explore the use the materials "in class and not only with the computer". In other words, they valued positively not only the computer work but also the pre- and post-computer tasks performed.

Hence, in spite of the reported benefits, the use of technology in the educational context demands pedagogical innovation as well. In the early days of CALL, fascinated by the potential capabilities of technology, many teachers focused on technological issues. At that time, they seemed unaware of the fact that innovative methodology was required to integrate satisfactorily the use of computers into the FL curriculum. Essential pedagogical and methodological issues were neglected. The potentiality of technology-enhanced language learning was consequently lost.

Therefore, it is crucial that educators, language and ICT experts realise that the use of ICT in the classroom implies the change of the roles not only of the learner, but also of the teacher. The challenge for the teacher is to integrate well-defined digital tasks, in response to language learning goals, in his/her daily teaching practice which enable learners to learn a foreign language (cf. Terry 1998), to further in the design of adequate tasks for non-native speakers, to adapt the existent pedagogical practices and to develop new ones. Future research, therefore, is needed in order to explore the ways ICT, both on and off line, can help children learn a foreign language. It is our purpose to proceed in the path initiated. We intend to continue analyzing and organizing the digital content and designing a coherent syllabus, lesson plans and methodological guidelines which may respond to the young learners needs.

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