

# **The Online Courses Developed to Enhance Vocabulary Skills**

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## **Abstract**

Multimedia and Internet technology have added new dimensions and options to the teaching of English. It might prove quite a challenge to find a good match between course objectives and the wide range of high-tech support options available. This presentation looks at how new English courses online successfully combine both pedagogical objectives and content with online opportunities. The presentation will first address the key theories and issues related to the creation of learning materials for online delivery. The session will finish with a brief introduction of the two newly developed online courses created by the presenter for the working adult students.

## **I. Introduction**

Online learning is growing rapidly. The use of multimedia and technology are taking an ever-increasing place in the classroom. Traditional colleges have been rapidly expanding their Internet and online offerings in recent years. The pace of change is accelerating and new approaches are being tried almost everyday.

It has not been long that online has exploded on the awareness of education and training professionals and widespread use has been achieved. It means there is not a lot of good evidence yet that online education is effective or of what makes a successful online learner. However, the growth of Internet-based learning has shown it to be effective, especially for rural, military and working students. It is now possible for all the world's best teachers to share the world's best lesson plans on line. In the current world entering the most momentous change that has ever come to the practice of learning and education, the educational systems should not fail to catch up the change. Over 90% of population has high speed Internet access in Korea and 17 online universities across the nation are developing formal online courses. Experience is, however, relatively limited so that ideas and approaches are essentially still being explored.

As a result of globalization, especially with Internet technology nowadays, knowing a foreign language is of crucial importance. It is especially true in the

case of English and a thorough knowledge requires thorough vocabulary knowledge. With many of latest teaching approaches and methods, college English instructors are improving their instructional practice. Teachers think of the effectiveness or relevance of their teaching for their students of mostly working adults and make conscious efforts to improve upon their teaching. Unfortunately in the case of online teaching, however, they are far limited in applying those approaches and methods.

Under these circumstances some of the literatures on vocabulary learning and the effect of using computers are first reviewed from a theoretical perspective and after checking the applicability in online setting suggestions are made for syllabus design appropriate for developing vocabulary and reading skills in online setting. This paper also highlights a range of ideas relating to the authentic use of newspapers in the EFL classroom to get the adult students interested in their online learning activities, and will help teachers free their students of the monotony so often associated with course books.

## **II. The Difference between Online and Traditional Courses**

Online learning which are sometimes used interchangeably with e-learning covers many different approaches that have in common the use of information and communication technologies. The major differences between traditional and online learning skills are the context and degree of importance of the skill. Online learners may be learning at a distance from both their peers and teachers, so they need to be far more self-sustained than the traditional learner. Instead of having face-to-face communication and having many informal opportunities in traditional classes, such as a brief chat in the corridor with other learners, most online learners dependent on short written messages (i.e. email or chat). Time management is critical in online learning since it provides greater opportunity to take control of the students' own learning and provides more opportunities for learners to take responsibility for their learning than traditional learning does. Reading is a key skill in online learning since most information is presented as text displayed on a screen which is comparable to the roles reading and listening play in traditional learning. Even though there are some limits in online learning such as face-to-face collaboration and interaction between students, online learning provides potentially more freedom to choose the place, pace and time of students' own learning. The design of online courses varies considerably, so the degree of freedom offered to learners will vary. The flexibility of the

program will depend on the objectives of the course and different courses will have a very different balance of methods and content. Online should be more learner-centered than traditional education and training. Teachers act more as facilitators and supporters of learners rather than controllers or directors. The responsibility for learning lies with students themselves.

### III. Literature Review

Many studies in the 1980s and 1990s showed the benefits of incidental vocabulary learning that occurs during the reading process and led to conclude that reading alone provides sufficient lexical growth and that direct vocabulary instruction is relatively unproductive. More recent trends in vocabulary acquisition research, however, suggest that it would be a mistake to completely discard direct instruction (Boyd Zimmerman, 1997) and has been toward greater acknowledgement of the role of vocabulary in L2 development.

Learners must learn the words of the new language. They also must experience these words in meaningful context, and they should experience them in the manner that native speakers of the language would use them (Pawley & Snyder 1983). Since vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in L2 reading and comprehension (Laufer, 1991; Qian, 1999, 2002) vocabulary learning can be chosen as pre-reading activity. While vocabulary learning and teaching was relatively ignored and down-played, the importance of vocabulary knowledge in language learning has been re-appreciated from a different perspective both by teachers and researchers and, consequently, much effort has been made to explore the nature of vocabulary knowledge (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Laufer, Elder, Hill, & Congdon, 2004). Gi-Pyo Park's study (2004) found that vocabulary knowledge pre-taught enhanced L2 reading comprehension greatly.

With the increasing availability of easy-to-use software recently for creating digital language exercise and the growing number of wired classrooms, many studies attempted to examine the efficacy of computer-based materials since these are being used more and more in language teaching.

Thomas Mach's (2006) research of whether the use of digital, web-based, "interactive" vocabulary materials promote greater acquisition gains than similar materials provided in a traditional print format showed that the answer to the research appeared to be negative. Also Chin Min Lin (2007) in his study, "the effects of language learning through a software program: the case of Taiwan EFL learners" showed that even though the correlation between the participants' improvement of reading and listening scores and the time participants spent on using the software was statistically significant and with a positive relationship,

participants' attitudes toward using the software are not unanimous. Some responded it was convenient and interesting to use the software; others responded that it was boring and inconvenient to use it. More and more studies have been trying to find out the effect of using computers on language learning. Some have revealed positive effects while the others haven't.

#### **IV. The Setting and the Subjects of the Courses Developed**

The two online English courses were designed for the working adult students; one titled as 'Basic English Reading' and the other, as 'Toeic Listening'. They were all for non-English major students being mostly freshmen and sophomores. Their English abilities vary from person to person. They were from different age groups. They came from a variety of discipline and school years and their levels of English reading were also mixed from beginners and intermediate groups. Ranging from the late 20s to 50s, most of them were working students. They were located from all over the nation and some from abroad. Challenging for better life and career, many of them have begun their study as continuing education. Because of the importance of English as international language, most of the students have just resumed their English learning after many years' interval.

##### **Vocabulary learning in 'Basic English Reading' course**

As 3 credit course the class was offered 3 times a week, resulting in 42 total classes. Each class consists of five or six sections such as Vocabulary, Self-Reading, Main Reading, Grammar Focus and Quiz. As a preliminary step for reading new words are first met in Vocabulary before entering Main Reading with which students practice enough to become familiar with by clicking the words. When the specific word is clicked, authentic native pronunciation is heard, first English only, and then with Korean meaning. For main reading articles, 40 stories were selected from the columns of Dear Abby and The Ethicist of New York Times Sunday magazine. Most of the articles are on moral and ethical issues on real-life situations. The students were instructed to pay careful and close attention to the vocabulary used in the stories.

Chosen among the articles over the past two years' materials, they are of the most intriguing and thought-provoking issues and enough to make the students 'involve emotionally and intellectually in interpreting culture and a real life facts.' (Heusinkveld, 1985) These were introduced according to the ascending order of difficulty in words and structures. The reading texts were analyzed for comprehension in the Main Reading section by the instructors connecting lexical and grammatical points through the contents. Three different kinds of questions

were provided; checking comprehension, vocabulary in context and grammatical knowledge. The digital versions for most practice and question types were designed for students to just click and drag. Immediate feedback was provided to individuals whenever an on-screen check or hint button was clicked. This resulted in more individual study time and the students were in control of the whole 30 minutes set aside in each class except the teacher's instruction for the comprehension of main text.

### Vocabulary Learning in Toeic Listening

The class was designed to prepare students for the Part III & IV of Toeic Listening. In order to promote greater acquisition gains than similar materials provided in traditional print format, a group of vocabulary were first selected and presented before their actual listening passages as a pre-activity. They were grouped according to the theme of the dialogue or short talk, such as travel, hospital, shopping, etc. The words are first pronounced by authentic native speakers together with written Korean meanings, then later shown only English without Korean meanings. Students can remain at the exercise as long as they want until they get a good grasp of the words presented. It is not at all clear that these online environments provide much of an improvement and leads to better learning results than the traditional ones but at least these may be worthwhile because these practice caused students to stay in class and take a greater interest in their learning.

## **V. Discussion**

In an EFL context, especially online, reading skills are the first step for adult learners before moving to the other skills in English. The general goal of the course was to maximize students' opportunities to use basic reading skills such as reading for general comprehension and for details.

To raise adult students' interest and motivation in reading lessons, authentic materials are first prioritized. Intellectual and cognitive level of the material should also be appropriate and stimulating to learners. The students' reaction to this class was very positive. The newspaper columns chosen such as Dear Abby and The Ethicist were proved very appropriate for the adult working students to substantiate the ideas based on the findings in the questionnaire after the courses. Students not only improved in their understanding of the vocabulary items in the stories but they also acquired new vocabulary in the process.

The text materials were much of relevance to them even in Korean context and created a great interest and maintained or increased their motivation for learning.

Many of the students were unable to comprehend either an authentic text or authentic speech at the beginning. Upon completing the course, students answered that they were able to apply these skills to other authentic and simplified articles and listening materials.

Economy of size and length to be covered in each class also should be considered online classes. This would leave a sense of finished feeling for both the teachers and the students. Especially in lower level classes the role of proper text material is very important. Even though many publications and materials are available for EFL instruction, much of the content is dry and boring and is not enough to draw adult beginner's attention. Especially for the working adult learners who resume their study after many years, the instructors need to focus on engaging the students and help them overcome difficulties in order to provide EFL learners with valuable language learning.

Even if this kind of Web-based learning do not directly lead to better learning results than conventional way in off-line classes, this may be worthwhile since it can cause students to stay in class and take a greater interest in their learning. They all felt they have achieved some progress and were very motivated for continuing their studies. Thomas Mach (2006) mentioned in his research, even though it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about whether an online environment provides the better setting for language learning, this types of interactivity provided by digital materials makes students more active participants and warrant assumptions of increased pedagogical effectiveness. (Nagy and Herman's, 1987)

Newspapers are usually considered to be demanding texts even for advanced learners. Yet they can be used with lower-level students, who benefit greatly from the exposure to authentic texts, the intrinsic motivation of current realistic stories. It is designed to convince the students that they can understand and benefit from reading English language newspapers.

## **VI. Conclusion and Implications**

The presenter tried to find ways to make vocabulary learning in online reading and listening classes both more interesting and more useful. Direct vocabulary instruction as pre-activity can enhance reading or listening skills and very productive especially for low level learners. The reading of realistic stories is one way of generating interest and motivation in learning English in a fun and non-threatening way. Specific newspaper columns can be an excellent springboard for lessons. They contain a vast array of authentic, naturally occurring language embedded in familiar and interesting contexts. As such they can be valuable resource to develop the reading skills of students. With a structured approach that

leads the students from recognition of the target language, through controlled and intensive practice activities, to free and genuine understanding, students develop a keen interest in reading and listening.

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### **Biodata**

Dr. Namhee Kong, professor of Seoul Cyber University, has been involved in ELT for 20 years. Currently she is engaged in the research and development of E-learning contents for adult learners. Her academic interests include materials development and classroom-based research in EFL contexts.

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