Chapter Six

Enhancing Self-directed Learning: Soochow's Virtual English Resource Centers

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6.1   Introduction

In recent years, most colleges and universities in Taiwan have made rigorous efforts to enhance the English abilities of their students, to make them more competitive in the world arena. In September 2001, the author undertook a research project under the auspices of the Taiwan Ministry of Education's Program for Improving the Common Curriculum of Universities. After careful deliberation, the author decided as a major goal for her research to create multi-media websites to provide college students on-line English self-learning resources.

There were several reasons for doing this. First of all, university students in Taiwan need only six to eight credits of English training to graduate. The amount of class time for their study of English can be very limited. Secondly, as found by Yu (1996), the class size for general English courses in Taiwan is often huge, and in those classes students' English abilities vary greatly. But by providing on-line learning materials in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), students can access learning materials at any time on any computer with an Internet browser

and a PPP (Point-to-Point Protocol) account, these obstacles to learning can all be overcome. Students can not only learn outside of class and without the limitations of class time and class size, but they can also choose materials suitable for their own levels of proficiency and learn at their own pace. As a result, many Taiwan universities have launched Web-enhanced language learning (WELL) programs to train students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. For example, Tsing Hua University created ForMOOsa [1], multiuser object-oriented domains. Tamkang University established IWILL [2], a highly interactive learning software program. Fu Jen University initiated Empower Effective Learning [3] for their students to learn on the Internet. Chi Nan University launched the NCNU Multimedia English Classroom [4], a web-based synchronized multimedia lecture system. Taiwan Normal University's virtual language learning resources center [5] provides a wide variety of web-based tools. Ocean University set up its virtual language lab [6], where a web-based chat robot is available for chatting at any time, and Central University is providing useful resources in its English learning database [7].

To address the needs of Soochow University students, the author developed two multimedia websites designed to help EFL college students improve their English skills. The making of these websites was supported in part by the Taiwan Ministry of Education's Program for Improving the Common Curriculum of Universities. The websites are located at http://mail.scu.edu.tw/~cynthiay and http://www2.scu.edu.tw/foreign/epower.

In this paper, the author will detail why and how she launched these virtual English centers as well as some of the difficulties she experienced

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[1] http://formoosa.fl.nthu.edu.tw:7000

[2] http://www.iwillnow.org

[3] http://www.elearn.fju.edu.tw/idea

[4] http://english.csie.ncnu.edu.tw）

[5] http://llrc.eng.ntnu.edu.tw

[6] http://ntouvlc.ntou.edu.tw

[7] http://www.ncu.edu.tw/~wenchi/english/index.html

in the process of creating them. By providing a prototype online program, the author hopes this paper will provide useful advice and suggestions for teachers who want to conduct similar projects.

6.2 Design of Soochow's Virtual English Resource Centers

English is obviously the most universal language used for World Wide Web content. The Web's multimedia capabilities and interactive functions have made it a motivating medium for English teaching and learning. However, although there is an immensity of English learning resources on the Internet, it is difficult for college students to screen and sort out suitable materials for their learning. Egbert (2001) maintains that the purpose of having students do research on the Internet is to provide them with more chances to read and write English. Therefore, teachers should ensure that students do not spend a great deal of time searching for resources. Kung & Chuo (2002) found that one reason their students did not go back to ESL sites is because the materials on the Internet did not match their ability levels. Some students complained about problems of too many new words, difficulty in navigation, uninteresting materials, and unavailability of materials useful for writing. In response, several researchers have introduced virtual developing language learning centers (Chen, 2003; Davis, 2002; Kelly, 2000; Freitas, Candido Varela de & Silva, Antonio Pedro da, 2000; Chen, 2000; and Peterson, 1998).

According to Jones (2000), three on-line language learning site models are currently available on the Internet – distributive, tutorial, and cooperative. The distributive model provides on-line materials or lesson pages for the learner to study independently. The pages usually contain multiple choice or gap-fill questions where the answers are automatically assessed. The tutorial model provides materials supplemented with two-way communication between the tutor and the learner. Learners are usually given assignments to submit via e-mail and the tutor gives feedback. In the cooperative model, learners interact with each other as

well as with the tutor. The content may consist of task-based learning that requires collaboration with other learners to complete.

Due to limited technical resources, the author had to choose the basic distributive model when designing the first website, now located at http://mail.scu.edu.tw/~cynthiay. A series of exercises and quizzes focusing on common mistakes of Chinese learners was used for self-assessment of learners' progress. Further, dozens of PowerPoint lessons – fully media capable, easy to use, and enjoyable – were made available on the webpage. As the author gained more experience in designing web-enhanced learning, she explored the cooperative model by creating a forum at the second website located at http://www2.scu.edu.tw/foreign/epower. This discussion forum provides students a chance to interact with each other over the Internet. These websites are free of charge, allowing access to any Internet-user.

Besides aiming to provide good content, the author realized that a multimedia environment is a good way to address students' many learning styles. Multimedia is defined as "a program or information environment that uses computers to integrate text, graphics, images, video, and audio" (Shih & Alessi, 1996, p. 204). Multimedia lessons can address simultaneously the modalities of a large number of learning styles. Hinkelman and Pysock (1992) indicated that, for Japanese university students, a multimodality lesson achieved almost 20% better retention of vocabulary than a lesson catering to a single modality did.

It was important to make the page visually pleasing but without any fancy formatting that might slow down loading. It was also necessary to design websites where learners could easily navigate and learn how the site works. As a final rule of thumb, the sites had to be simple to maintain and update. The author also made sure nothing was done that might limit the number of people that could benefit from this site. In the process of creating the website, the author followed the guidelines of Davis (2002) and Kelly (2000).

The author recruited two assistants, veterans in creating web pages, to deal with the technological aspects of web-based multimedia. Even so,

they encountered several technical difficulties. For example, it was hard to produce sound files that would not overburden any computer and telecommunication resources that were limited. Each recording of the author's feedback on students' writing could be several MBs in size; it might take a great deal of time to download and play such a file. Learners working on computers with slow dial-up modems might not be able to listen to the files at all. The two assistants also had difficulties utilizing the Web Point and Web Guider software to stream audio and video. Often, they could not synchronize the recorded audio with the corresponding video file in one presentation. If these problems could be resolved, it would be possible to stream all media including video, text, and background music into one online multimedia presentation.

6.3 The First Website: http://mail.scu.edu.tw/~cynthiay

The author first conducted a detailed search of the Internet for websites that tried to provide lessons on common mistakes in English. She used search engines, reviewed collections of ESL/EFL links, and attended relevant conferences. Findings showed that few websites targeted this aspect of learning. The Hong Kong Virtual Learning Center provides a webpage for common errors in English[8]. Paul Brian's homepage lists English words often misused, in an alphabetical order[9]. The author found the lessons given in these websites were not targeted at learners whose native language is Mandarin Chinese. Further, because all the information was given in English, it might be difficult for college students to understand. Some writing teachers in Fu Jen University and Chi Nan University in Taiwan created web pages for similar purposes, but access was mostly limited to students taking the teachers' courses.

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[8] http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/common/
[9] http://www.wsu.edu:8080/%7Ebrians/errors/errors.html

Therefore, instead of spreading time and effort too thin to produce a comprehensive site, the author first decided to build a site around the theme of common mistakes of native Mandarin Chinese speaking learners of English.

6.3.1   Common Errors of Chinese Learners of English

The author has taught college EFL Writing class for more than 10 years. While correcting students' writings, she often tries to identify the mistakes which many of her students make. The errors introduced in this section are only a part of the author's database.

When speaking and writing English, many students in Taiwan think in Chinese and then translate the Chinese sentence word for word into English. The following example shows how students translate a Chinese sentence into English.

Chinese:	you	Hao-ji-bai	ren	Can-jia	Kao-shi
English:	*There were	hundreds of	people	took	the test.

However, in English the expression "there were" is not necessary in this context, and in fact is wrong because of the lack of "who" to create a clause after "people." The most correct sentence in the best style is "Hundreds of people took the test." In a similar vein, almost all students have been exposed to the sentence "None of them are students." However, when required to express the same meaning in English, a majority of students would say "*Every one of them is not a student," an impossibility in English because of the proscription against using "every" rather than "none" in negative sentences.

Another example is that in English a pair of verbs can be used to encode action (such as "to die") and condition ("be dead"), while in Chinese, there is only one lexical item ("guo-si") to encode both action and condition (Yu & Butler, 2000). As a result, students often make such mistakes as "*His father has died for a long time."

Lee	xian-sheng	**Guo-si le**	Shang-li-bai
Mr.	Lee	**died**	last week.
Lee	xian-sheng	**Guo-si le**	Hao-ji-nian
Mr.	Lee	**has been dead**	for several years.

Finally, students often have serious problems with collocation in English. In the following example, the Chinese verb "can-jia" can be followed by a group of different nouns, while in English each of these nouns has to be preceded by a different verb and article or preposition combination. When translating their ideas from Chinese to English, students often say "*take part in a wedding," "*attend a discussion," and "*attend a club."

Chinese/English Verb	Chinese/ English Noun
can-jia/ take	kao-shi / a test
can-jia/ attend	hun-li/ a wedding
can-jia/participate in	tao-lun/ a discussion
can-jia/ join	ju-le-bu/ a club
can-jia/ compete in	bi-sai/ a contest

To help students learn to correct their mistakes, the author tried to provide explanations for how the learners' first language could interfere with their perception and accurate production of English. The author first pointed out the sources for possible mistakes by illustrating differences in usage, especially in collocations, between Chinese and English, and then provided exercises that emphasized the contrast in order to provide clear explanations for the common mistakes introduced in each unit. The author also consulted works of Bernath (2002), Canning (1986) and André & Su (1992) for verification and further information.

The common mistakes introduced in this section are organized into five parts. Table 6.1 is a list of the number of units in each part.

Table 6.1

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Part 1	Action and condition verbs	6 units
Part 2	Adverbs and conjunctions	6 units
Part 3	Troublesome words	15 units
Part 4	Chinese vs. English	4 units
Part 5	Others	4 units

Each unit starts with a pre-test allowing learners to assess their knowledge in the subject. The pre-test is followed by a lesson in which detailed explanations are provided. After some study, learners can evaluate their progress by taking a post-test. Pre-tests and post-tests usually consist of multiple choice or gap-fill questions where the answers are automatically assessed. Because each page is just a click

away, students can choose to skip the explanation or the post-test if they do a good job on the pre-test.

6.3.2   Corrected Student Writings

With consent from the students in the author's writing class, she made their compositions available on the Internet. The essays are organized by general rhetorical patterns, i.e., description, narration, and argumentation. These compositions were all corrected, and mistakes or improvements are clearly marked in red. Further, the author recorded her comments on the structure and organization of each student piece. Viewers can click on an audio icon to listen to the author's comments.

6.3.3   Model Compositions

The author also showed some of her own writing, as well as superior model compositions she found on different web pages. Most of the articles were written by high school students in America. She sent a request to the web owners for permission to include the articles on her webpage. However, she was informed that she could only add hyperlinks for easy access to the articles. The model writings are also organized according to major rhetorical patterns: personal narrative, expository writing, descriptive writing, and persuasive writing.

6.3.4   Internet Resources for English Learning

The World Wide Web is like a global library on the desktop. There has been an astonishing increase in the number of sites that offer information on English learning. Therefore, another project the author assigned to the students in the TEFL course was to write a report about the ESL/EFL Web sites they visited and discuss whether the sites were useful and effective from a learner's point of view. The author then compiled and categorized the websites collected from the students' reports and included them in the program. A brief description of each site was also made available to help learners make better use of the sites.

6.4 The Second Website:

http://www2.scu.edu.tw/foreign/epower

After the website focusing on common mistakes of Chinese learners was created, the author felt there was still a need to develop a multimedia website devoted to the Freshman English course (for non-English Department freshmen) and the Listening Comprehension and Oral English course (for all sophomores) at Soochow University. As the two courses involve dozens of teachers and more than 5,000 students each year, it was felt that a website easily accessible over the Internet could serve several purposes. First, because for both courses many teachers use the same texts and materials, pooling lesson plans and other teaching resources for all to share would avoid waste of effort. Second, the website could also provide a forum for all teachers and students to discuss topics of interest to them. Furthermore, a multimedia website can be a great setting for autonomous learning. Teachers can provide various tasks to help students develop strategies for learning to listen, speak, read and write. Materials related to English teaching and learning at the

college level can all be made available at the website. Finally, such a website can encourage students to venture beyond the confines of their individual classes and interact with the teachers and students of other classes. It was hoped that this website could promote in all the teachers and students of the two general English courses a sense of a community and develop in them a willingness to help each other in teaching and learning.

Currently the website is divided into three major parts: the Freshman English course, the Listening Comprehension and Oral English course, and Self-directed Learning. The author provided most of the materials for the Freshman English course while Sylvia Shih, a veteran teacher, was in charge of the Listening Comprehension and Oral English course. Once funding from the Ministry of Education was secured, the author collaborated with experienced teachers in supplying suitable online self-directed learning materials. There are six sections in Self-directed Learning: Testing, Reading, Writing, Forums, Learning Resources, and Culture and Daily Life. The author coordinated and produced materials for the section of Writing, Forums, Learning Resources, and Culture and Daily Life.

6.4.1　PowerPoint Self-study Lessons

The use of PowerPoint for teaching and teaching has become prominent during the last decade. Fisher claims,

> PowerPoint presentations are easy to obtain, modify, and create. They are versatile and a great asset to any classroom. Good presentations may take time to produce or adapt, but they can be shared and used year after year. They can be used for whole class presentations and reviews, for drills, or for individual work (2003, Conclusion section).

With this kind of software, teachers can use their own content to create a wide variety of educational programs that are fully media capable, easy to use, and enjoyable (Wachman, 1999). Beginning with the 1997-1998 academic year, the author integrated PowerPoint training into the curriculum of the TEFL course (Yu, 2001). One of the assigned projects for the course was to use PowerPoint to produce a self-study lesson.

The author archived some of her student's PowerPoint lessons over three years. They covered a wide range of themes, such as grammar, vocabulary, phrases and most importantly culture. The students who produced these lessons went extra miles to make them truly motivating by adding interesting graphics and exercises. The author screened, edited, sorted out and finally structured these lessons in compliance with the general framework of the website.

Some of the grammar lessons were used to supplement True Colors III, the text material for the listening and speaking segment of the Freshman English course. For example, the PowerPoint lesson on Present Perfect tense was used to supplement Unit 1 of the text material because of shared grammar targets. Other lessons were provided in the Culture and Daily Life section of Self-directed Learning. For example, there is a lesson on snacks at the local Shilin Night Market. There are also lessons related to Western culture, such as Halloween and Christmas. Still other lessons in the writing section of Self-directed Learning help students improve their writing skills. For example, there is a lesson that

introduces collocation in English. The Chinese verb "ti chu" ("bring up") can be followed by a group of different nouns, while in English each of these nouns has to be preceded by a different verb.

6.4.2   The Self-directed Learning Writing Section

This section aims to help Freshman English students become more aware of the rhetoric and thought sequences employed when writing in English. The author designed PowerPoint lessons to explain different rhetorical patterns (definition, narration, classification, comparison, cause and effect, etc.) and typical transition words often associated with each pattern. The author also made available samples of her previous Freshman English students' writing. With the software Markin, the author clearly labeled most of the students' common mistakes and provided detailed statistics and comments for each student sample. There is also a web-based chat robot available in this section of the program and students can chat with it at any time.

6.4.3 Forums

In order to motivate students to use English for authentic communication, a forum was set up to allow students to conduct out-of-class electronic discussions. The forum is open to all teachers and students of the Freshman English course and the Listening Comprehension and Oral English courses. All discussions are threaded (organized by topics) and all postings are held in the university's mainframe server for the students to access at their own convenience. Those who want to participate in discussions need to register with a login name and must choose a password. At the time of this writing, there are already hundreds of students who have become members of the forum. The possibility of setting up smaller interest groups has been taken into consideration. However, the real power of this kind of communication lies not merely in authentic use of the target language but in helping build socially collaborative communication.

6.5 Future Developments

The author plans to prepare an online survey inviting visitors to respond

to the two websites. Based on comments from the visitors, she can then adapt, revise, or discard ideas to better target and customize the websites.

Because financial resources were limited and there were no sufficiently skilled programmers who could handle the technological aspects of a more sophisticated webpage, the author could only provide on-line materials or lesson sheets for the learner to study independently. However, should sufficient financial and technical resources become available in the future, meaningful tasks requiring collaboration with other learners to complete could also be provided. Further, teachers or tutors could be recruited to offer regular on-line help and immediate feedback to individual learners, avoiding the risk of embarrassment or intimidation if the feedback were made available to everyone.

6.6 Conclusion

Although the websites were limited by the technology and financial resources invested in them, the author felt that she succeeded in developing a niche within the corridors of cyberspace. She provided in-depth materials on common mistakes of Chinese learners of English which have not been offered at most other websites. The website for the Freshman English course and the Listening Comprehension and Oral English course has unprecedently integrated the two courses and catered to the needs of a large number of teachers and students.

However, the time and effort invested in various technological experiments to achieve certain effects can be overwhelming for language teachers. After the web pages were set up, worries about up-dating and maintenance work remained. If there is no on-going financial and technical support, it will be difficult to keep the website up-to-date to attract visitors. Further research along this line needs to be conducted to find out whether these learning resources are effective in helping learners master the target lessons.

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