

Reinders, H. 2003 'A cost-benefit analysis for using the Internet in the language classroom' *New Zealand Language Teacher*, 29:33-36.

A cost-benefit analysis for using the Internet in the language classroom.

In recent years, the internet has obtained its place in the language teaching classroom. Many teachers now make use of the internet to find authentic materials, to motivate learners, for communication with native speakers through email, chatrooms, or discussion boards or just to try something different. The initial motivation for the teacher to experiment with technologies for language teaching may come from an enthusiastic computer-savvy colleague. Or it may come from the learners: students bringing electronic dictionaries, text-messaging in classtime or simply asking how to find relevant information and practice materials on the internet. This may lead the teacher to consider how to put these novelties to good use. There may also be an external motivation. In many countries (for example in European Union member states) the ability to use the internet and other new technologies for communication in foreign languages is expressly written into national secondary school curricula and these skills are assumed in many tertiary contexts.

To use technology successfully, often large investments in both time and money are involved, not least on the part of the individual language teacher. Clear benefits are not always visible from this effort. Sometimes, computer literacy seems to be the only result of using computers in the language classroom. Developing these skills may be useful, but is certainly not the responsibility of a language teacher.

How then, do teachers decide when and how to experiment with integrating technology in their lessons? A number of factors are involved such as the support available from the school or institution, the availability of computers and technical support, the degree of freedom in the curriculum and so on. In this practical article we will focus on one necessary step in this process: the assessment of the available materials in terms of their costs (time, effort, money, etc) and their benefits (learning gains, motivation, skill development, etc) in order to decide whether using them is worthwhile. Through a questionnaire, language teachers can find out what these costs and benefits are and how they stack up.

The questionnaire has been trialled with a number of secondary school language teachers in the Netherlands. From feedback received through an anonymous questionnaire it was found that the questionnaire was seen as a useful and efficient way to determine whether or not to try out new media and that reflecting on the questions often led the teachers to coming up with new ideas on how to use technology in the language classroom.

Although this article concentrates on the selection of websites, similar questions can be asked about many technologies and pedagogic applications such as email exchanges, electronic dictionaries, cdroms, etc. In asking these questions, it is hoped language teachers can make better informed decisions more quickly in order to avoid disappointment.

How to use the questionnaire

Read the questions below and answer them on the last page by encircling a number.

4 = yes, certainly

3 = rather

2 = little

1 = no, not at all

There is no "no opinion" option: all questions must be answered. Some answers can of course be crucial. When not enough computers are available, answering any more questions will be

unnecessary. If this is the case then check the "insurmountable obstacle" box. If a certain advantage is extremely important, check the box "major advantage".

Part 1: Costs

1. Does the staff at our school/institution have the necessary skills to work with this site?
Different Internet sites demand different skills. Here are 2 examples:
 - A. The site of a newspaper requires skills in using search queries.
 - B. A text based adventure game called A MOO (a 'multiple user dimension object oriented'), that can be used by several players at the same time, requires knowledge of specific programs and the meta language (commands) used on the site.

2. Do our students have the necessary skills to work with this site?
 - A. How difficult is the language used in this site? The level of English used can be an obstacle, but also the use of meta language as found in a MOO.
 - B. Do our students have the technical skills to work with this site? Do I have to teach them new skills? If so, how much time will this cost me?

3. Is the necessary equipment for working with this site available?
 - A. Does the site have to be visited during class hours (for instance in case of synchronic communication as used in a chatroom or in a MOO)? Organising this is probably more difficult than handing students an assignment to work on at home or in the library after class.
 - B. Does the site make use of audio or video? If so, the computers have to be positioned in a way that does not cause inconvenience to other students, for instance by installing semi-sound proof cubicles. Playback of audio and video material of course also places greater demands on the system.
 - The computers may not be equipped to play videos well
 - Headphones may not be available
 - The use of large files may take up too much bandwidth and cause network problems
 - C. How many computers are needed? Will all students work with the site simultaneously?
 - D. Does specific software have to be bought or installed? Some Internet sites only work well with the latest browser versions. Playing certain types of so-called streaming audio or video content (audio and video files that can be played back without downloading them first) often requires specific software like, for instance, Realplayer. If this software is not available, then how much would be involved in getting it installed? It would be best to talk to your system administrator about this.

4. Can we implement the use of this site easily and quickly into our courses?

An assignment to search for more information on a certain subject, for instance on the website of a newspaper is simple to develop and can be fit into a lesson easily.
Organising a meeting with a native speaker, for instance an interview with a writer by webcam (a small video camera used for internet communication) takes a lot more time to prepare.

5. Is the site easily accessible?

Is the site fast? Or can it easily be transferred to the local network? Transferring a static site (for instance a list with descriptions for all hotels in Australia) is relatively easy and only has to be done once every few months. More interactive sites are more difficult to transfer. For these sites, it is important to know whether access is fast and possible at all times. Otherwise using the site would take too long, especially during class time.

6. Can the site only be used for the intended purpose?

- A. Can the students visit other, inappropriate sites? If the site is on the local network this is of course easier to control.
- B. Can the students come across inappropriate content while using the site? In chatrooms rude language is used on a regular basis. It may pay to do some preliminary testing.

Benefits

- 7. Does the content of the site have a didactic advantage over other existing teaching material?
 - A. This could be the case where a site uses authentic language or up to date information.
 - B. Sometimes the Internet offers content that is otherwise unavailable, such as for less commonly taught languages, or content that may be otherwise be very expensive to obtain (e.g. online journals).
- 8. Does this site offer anything that would otherwise be hard to do/organise?

Especially for some languages, contact with native speakers can be very difficult without the use of email and internet. Tandem learning, where students of two different schools work in pairs or small groups, or email penpals are examples of ways of working that are often easier accomplished through using the internet.
- 9. Is the website motivating?

The internet can be very motivating, especially when communication with other students is involved. Also the internet provides a lot of authentic material that can be very stimulating. Information on holiday destinations, illustrated with photographs of campsites and other points of interest is well liked by most students.
- 10. By using this website, will our students learn other (non-language-related) skills that we value?
 - A. For example, using search queries and databases.
 - B. An opportunity for the students to develop skills in using certain software (e.g. word processors) can be a plus.
 - C. This also applies to technical- or meta language used on a site.
- 11. Will others benefit from our experiences?

Good or bad experiences can of course be shared with colleagues. Installed software can be used by others. The more your work can be shared with others, the more it may be worth the effort.
- 12. Does the site have other benefits?
 - A. The reasoning here can be diverse. The internet could provide students with more opportunities to work from home. You may see it as a personal professional development experience.

1. Does the staff at our school/institution have the necessary skills to work with this site?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
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2. Do our students have the necessary skills to work with this site?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		Major advantage		score	
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3. Is the necessary equipment for working with this site available?

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4. Can we implement the use of this site easily and quickly into our courses?

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6. Can the site only be used for the intended purpose?

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7. Does the content of the site have a didactic advantage over other existing teaching material?

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8. Does this site offer anything that would otherwise be hard to do/organise?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
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10. By using this website, will our students learn other (non-language-related) skills that we value?

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11. Will others benefit from our experiences?

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12. Does the website have other benefits?

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Total score: _____

Conclusions

- 36-48 There are little disadvantages and a lot of benefits. Go for it!
- 24-36 There are benefits and some disadvantages. Are there "insurmountable obstacles" or "major advantages"? Let these help you decide. Otherwise look at the obstacles and estimate their importance.
- 12-24 There are a lot of disadvantages and not so many benefits. However, if you have identified a "major advantage", this could tip the balance.
- 0-12 There are few benefits and a lot of disadvantages. Have a latte instead.