

# Teaching Composition on the Internet

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## Summary

Little real research seems to have been conducted in this specific field, although many textbooks based on the concept of “Internet English” are beginning to appear. Such textbooks are basically encouraging only reading skills, avoiding composition, and with the only oral/ aural component being the instructions from the teacher. Furthermore, more often than not they lack any web based supporting component, and so regrettably soon fade out of date due to the dynamism of the web. Instead, I will look at some alternative ways of using the Internet to teach web composition skills for the near future until new technologies develop. I will focus particularly on some of the novelties thrown up when conducting classes with mainly Japanese students at the tertiary level.

Finally I argue that current Internet textbooks are of limited practical value in the classroom and fulfill only a stopgap role until new hardware technology comes available. I will conclude by speculating on the direction this technology will take and how educational establishments can position themselves to take fullest advantage of the emerging opportunity this presents.

## 1. Research and publications to date

Reveler’s *English on the Net* (1997) is typical of the traditional publications to date. It is a responsibly written guidebook to the web, introducing well-constructed sites of interest. There are many valuable points to note: Reveler encourages a critical mindset; the students are encouraged to question and evaluate the information contained within emails as well as to consider the credibility of the site host/ webmaster.

However, *English on the Net* fails to encourage student response using the net itself, rather requiring students to write their response down in a questionnaire format on paper. Furthermore, the central focus seems to be grammatical structure rather than free response. Student creativity is not prioritized, but subjugated to the demands of the school’s exam timetable and the teacher’s marking schedule.

## 2. Composition as free creation

Instead a different approach to the Internet is proposed: I suggest giving the students at tertiary level free rein subject to the caveats listed below and permitting them to express openly what they have to say in their non-native languages, albeit under the supervision of the teacher. Hassard (1999) advocates a similar project driven approach for teaching science in western schools, but this is as equally valid an approach in language teaching, especially Internet composition. Tertiary level students especially want to use the practical side of their language skills, since on graduation they enter the business world where theoretical niceties of grammar are subject to the hard realities of corporate communication. Having asked the students what type of career they were anticipating, a number of projects were drawn up. Of course, depending on the class the nature and range of topics will differ, but the ones put into effect by the author are listed below.

In this paper, the term Internet encompasses a lot of technologies, including web site design, email and Internet chat. Each will be dealt with separately and in turn.

### A. Caveats

Before teaching it is important to establish an Acceptable Internet Usage Policy (Geffon (1997)). If the school does not have one it is important to talk this through with the class before lessons begin. Ideally some form of written contract should be agreed between the students and the teacher, making it clear where responsibility lays for backing up students' work, using copyrighted graphics, proprietary terms and explicit language. If the compositions are posted on the University server, it must be stressed that the content will be censored by the academic staff in line with the AIU. Other dangers such as the release of personal data should be mentioned. In our class this was compared to the wisdom of leaving one's family register (*koseki tohon*) on the bus. The theft of personal data is a reality in any country, but due to the international essence of the web, the opportunity for abuse is magnified. Our students were encouraged to use aliases. In the business email lessons, fake names, job titles and companies were used.

### B. Web Design

#### *Topics and themes*

Personal homepages were initially built by each student to give them a chance to gain familiarity with the technology. Many students used family photographs, while others dwelt on hobbies, and music interests. Simple biographies of famous celebrities was also a popular theme. Their first web pages were often eclectic and of narrow personal interest, but this is also representative of the web in general, where many single issue sites, and personal pages run alongside colossal corporate and media managed webs. From there, the students were encouraged

to consider the writing styles of professional pages, and designed a tourism site for a popular attraction within Nagasaki, which relies principally on tourism for its local economy. With Nagasaki's international history unique within Japan, It was felt that such web experience would prepare the students for a local career using their English skills. Other ideas included a site advertising a small family owned inn, a specific brand of local produce to be sold outside of Japan, and a site looking at Japanese heritage and traditions in a modern context.

#### *Software and computer languages*

Depending on the students' ability, this should probably be taught in the native tongue since many students are still technophobic. Our students used FrontPage 2000 in Japanese, so they did not need to learn any HTML/DHTML, JavaScript or CGI routines. An internet composition class is principally structured around encouraging the students to express ideas in English, and so the students were not marked down for technological naivety, but were of course given extra credit for experimentation. Marks were also given for the creative use of screen space, colour and graphics.

#### *Design*

Design, taste and imagination cannot really be taught but could be picked up intuitively by the students. It is important to give the students the opportunity to see for themselves different types of layout and structure out there on the web. Let them browse a few sites which are well designed, well written and have credible content. For example, I recommend CNN, BBC, most western broadsheets which have a presence on the web, The Japan Times and Daily Yomiuri and sites I have built myself. From this the students can gain a feel for the differences between sites which use Roman letters and those which use Chinese characters. Basically the key difference can be summarized as follows:

Style A (After CNN and BBC)

Title	
Menu Link Link Link	Text and photos
Link Link	

Style B (After the Japan Times)

	Advertisement	
		Photo or Ad
		Photo or Ad
		Photo or Ad

Style C (After Yomiuri Shinbun Japanese Version)

Title						
Link	Link	Link	Link	Link	Link	Link
Photo		Text or Link Text or Link			Chinese letters	
					Chinese letters	

Figure 1: Some simplified examples of page layouts taken from the web.

Refer to main text for detail.

Basically there are two main differences based on the fact Japanese uses Chinese characters: firstly the text can be much smaller, so more information/ hyperlinks can be squeezed into the same space. Secondly, Chinese characters can be displayed horizontally as well as vertically, allowing more flexibility of design. Figure 1 shows some simplified examples of a few different page layouts found on the web. All three styles can be used for Japanese language sites, but only the first style can really be used with Roman characters: Saying this it should be mentioned that there is an incredible diversity of styles out there and the students should be allowed to experiment and see for themselves what works and what does not. Style C creates a long page with a lot of scrolling and this type of page only really works when the reader is looking for some specific content which he/ she knows can be found within the text. For this reason it is popular with the Daily Yomiuri. Styles A and B maximize first impact and do not require much scrolling. They

work best for personal and most commercial homepage applications, as well as a media site's Web Portal platform. The students' webs were saved in the communal folder and were later submitted on the University's server after being examined by academic staff.

### C. Email

Email is basically divided into personal and business applications. It should be noted that even in the West the protocols are only just beginning to be worked out. With our students, analogies from traditional media, such as postcards and business letters were used. Real examples sent to the author were presented in class. Personal email was simpler to teach since the structure and tone are identical to postcards and personal memos. The students enjoyed playing with the tone and language involved. The business emails were structured using the handout found in Appendix. The emails were formatted in plain text, and included a fictitious signature at the bottom of the email created by each student. My signature appears as Figure 2:

Yours sincerely,

Sebastian Sainoo-Fuller

.....  
Sebastian Sainoo-Fuller

Nagasaki College of Foreign Languages

Telephone: 095 XXX XXXX

Fax: 095 XXX XXXX

Email: fuller@tc.nagasaki-gaigo.ac.jp  
.....

The contents of this email are confidential and for the attention of the addressee only.

Any opinions contained in this mail are private and do not reflect the policy of the University unless explicitly mentioned.  
.....

End of Message  
.....  
.....

Figure 2: an example of a signature suffixed to an email message

The topics of the business emails themselves followed a variety of themes: complaining about the service in a hotel, making an appointment for a sales meeting, ordering a product, and asking a college senior to meet and give advice about careers. Attention was paid to the tone, language and content, as well as the style and form detailed in Appendix. The email compositions were submitted to the author as email, as a print-out and in document format to ensure misunderstandings could not arise.

#### **D. Chat**

Currently different types of chat- for example ICQ, AOL, Yahoo Microsoft Messenger and NetMeeting: Some use keyboard input whilst others use web cams. The students did not try to use either chat system for the following reasons: ICQ or Microsoft Messenger use keyboard input, making this type of chat similar to prose composition. However, native speakers use a bewildering range of slang, and shortcuts which derive from text messaging and pagers (Jansen (2002)). The pace of interaction is also prohibitively fast, even for tertiary level students. The lack of face-to-face contact also means that some chat sites can degenerate into abusive language, which a teacher cannot monitor, also making communication a distressing experience for the users. Web cams, due to their face-to-face nature circumvent this issue, but it should be noted that Nova and Berlitz language companies have tried using this technology and it has failed to take off in Japan as a teaching device. Web cams fail to provide the realistic human interaction a native teacher supplies. It is worth considering that web cams are set to become a key form of international human interaction in the future and so should not be neglected altogether.

#### **E. Future directions for composition and language teaching on the Web.**

This paper has considered ways of using the internet to teach composition in a second language, since at the moment reading and composition are the only two skills which can be practically applied to the net. As palm top technology develops, I hope that this will change and teachers will have the opportunity to use the web to teach specific speaking and listening skills too.

Secondly, as palm-top technology takes off, the portability advantage of paper books will become negligible, further enhancing the benefits of the net's dynamism. Composition classes will have to acknowledge the strength web publishing has over traditional paper publishing is that it is dynamic. Dynamic in two ways: firstly web content can be in the form of movies, sound recordings, moving pictures, 3d images and hyperlinks which interact with the end user. Secondly, the content can be rapidly updated by rewriting the pages and including new information. Indeed much content, such as dates and times can be automatically updated by the server itself without human supervision. As students become more computer literate, composition classes will have to

include all these forms of media to prepare the students for the world after academia.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the utility of composition classes for the internet will only increase in time. The demand for well written attractive web sites and effective email communication in a range of languages will increase as globalization opens new markets through the web. Composition techniques and design strategies vary from language to language, and ought to be taught as part of any second language curriculum. As educators we are responsible for ensuring that our students have the opportunity to acquire experience in this field, as it will enhance our students' career options upon graduation.

## Internet resources

<http://www.bbc.co.uk>

The portal of the British Broadcasting Corporation

<http://www.cnn.com>

The index page for Central News Network

<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/index-e.htm>

Daily Yomiuri Newspaper, English edition

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/>

The Japan Times English Language Daily

[www.geocities.com/okayamauni](http://www.geocities.com/okayamauni)

An ELT composition homepage designed by the author

<http://best-of-web.com/entertainment/chat.shtml>

Guide to Internet Chat rooms- with caveats

<http://www.jaltcall.org/>

JALT special interest group, *Computer Assisted Language Learning Group (C@ll)*

## Other resources:

B. Abbey (ed.). *Instructional and Cognitive Impacts of Web-based Education* Hershey, P.A.. Idea Group Pub.. 2000

C. A. Cunningham, M. Billingsley. *Curriculum Web: A Practical Guide to Weaving the Web into Teaching and Learning*. Allyn and Baker. 2002

J. Hassard. "*Science as Inquiry: Active Learning, Project based, web assisted and Active Assessment Strategies to Enhance Student Learning*". New York. Goodyear Pub. Co.. 1999

S. Horton. "*Web teaching Guide: A practical Approach to Creating Course Web Sites*". Yale. Yale University Press. 2000

W. K. Horton "*Designing Web-based Training: How to Teach Anyone, Anything, Anywhere, Anytime*". New York. Wiley and Sons. 2002

E. Jansen. "*Netlingo: The Internet Dictionary*". New York. Netlingo Inc.. 2002

M. J. Rosenberg. "*E-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age*". New York. McGraw Hill Text. 2000

G. Salmon. "*E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*". London. Kogan Page. 2000

S. Ko, S. Rosen. "*Teaching Online: A Practical Guide*". Boston, M.A. Houghton Mifflin. 2000

D. Teeler. "*How to use the Internet in ELT*". New York. Longman/ Pearson ESL. 2000

M. Geffon. "*Acceptable Internet Usage Policies*". C@lling Japan (JALT), Vol. 9/3, 2001.

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Appendix

