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Crowdsourced Language Learning: Lessons for TESOL Educators from Online Language-Learning Enthusiasts

In recent years, the Internet has seen an explosion of hobbyists and practitioners for every activity imaginable. These online enthusiasts share their passion and knowledge about an amazing array of activities gained through countless hours of practice, thought, and discussion. I became acquainted with these enthusiasts as a learner of Korean as a second language. My online explorations of enthusiasts' sites allowed me to come into contact with a wealth of helpful and informative language-learning resources that I have applied to my own teaching, with positive results.

That experience has led me to believe English-language teachers and their learners should know about these resources. Participating in online language-learning spaces such as blogs, video-streaming sites like YouTube, and online forums has exposed me to valuable language-learning suggestions; equally important, many participants in these forums serve as excellent models of successful language learners. Several of the sites also bring together a community of fellow language learners to provide guidance and support for dealing with the practical and emotional challenges encountered during the often arduous journey that is learning another language.

English-language teachers should consider introducing their learners to these online resources because the enthusiasts can encourage greater learner autonomy, spark genuine student motivation, and facilitate collaborative learning. This article will discuss several practical issues teachers need to keep in mind when exploring these resources, including potential benefits to learners, examples of language-learning tools available, and pitfalls to avoid. The article concludes with a suggested sequence of classroom activities that teachers can follow to gradually acquaint learners with these resources.

SUPPORT FROM RESEARCH

Three areas of research support the suggestion to incorporate online resources into the language-learning classroom. The first

is the scholarship related to *Web 2.0*, the new World Wide Web generation that embodies interactive content, social media, and online education. Specific benefits identified in the online-learning research include increased learner autonomy (Beetham and Sharpe 2013); more authentic opportunities to apply knowledge (Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver 2010); and the ability to collaborate with people across the globe (Stoltenkamp and Mapuva 2010) without having to physically meet (Capper 2001). Blogs have been found to improve language ability (Hewett 2000) and promote language-learning strategies (Murray and Hourigan 2008). Consumption of blog content can also develop "higher-order thinking skills such as the ability to evaluate and synthesize" (Ford 2007, 9). YouTube and other sites offer learners incredible amounts of information presented through multimodal means (Bloom and Johnston 2010) while also creating a learning community "where everyone has a voice [and] anyone can contribute" (Educause 2006, 2). Social-networking sites allow learners to practice speaking with other English speakers through video conferencing and to receive immediate peer feedback (Godwin-Jones 2005).

A second well-researched idea supporting the activities presented below involves learning communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) originated the notion of communities of practice to explain their observations of powerful informal learning occurring within various types of organizations in places such as factory lunchrooms and teacher lounges. According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015, 1), "communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Recent scholarship also explains how the formation of these online-learning communities circumvents geographical constraints to support the collaboration of like-minded people from around the world (Li et al. 2009).

A third and final area of research relevant to this discussion relates to language-learning

strategies. Anderson (2005, 758) points out that this research explores the "strategies that good learners use while engaged in language learning tasks." Eventually, this research evolved into efforts to identify particular language-learning strategies that are effective for learners (Oxford 1990) and that continue today (Plonsky 2011). These inquiries inform us that it is beneficial to learn from others' language-learning methods. This article similarly encourages learners to explore the resources discussed below to help them vicariously learn from successful language learners' experiences.

While the importance of research for the language-teaching enterprise is clear, Krashen (1982) points out that research is only one source of useful knowledge for the language-teaching profession. He also reminds us that theory, practice-derived ideas, and intuition are valuable sources of stimuli for methodology and materials. If TESOL educators recognize the value of hard-won language-learning experience and familiarize themselves with the ideas of communities of successful language enthusiasts, they can then introduce their learners to these potentially helpful resources.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Before reviewing the benefits of becoming acquainted with these communities, we need to be aware of potential pitfalls in exploring them and using their resources. First, many people face constraints on Internet access to these resources due to bandwidth limitations or regional restrictions on access to particular sites. However, while some sites may be inaccessible depending on one's country of residence, others—particularly forums and blogs—may be available, so searching for what is accessible is often worth the effort.

Second, as with Internet content in general, there is the standard admonition regarding the lack of quality control; potentially useful advice is sometimes mixed in with questionable guidance or solicitations to buy learning products of dubious value.

The best way we can help is to become discerning consumers of these resources ourselves and pass on that knowledge to our students.

This is where teachers serve as a helpful filter for their learners. The best way we can help is to become discerning consumers of these resources ourselves and pass on that knowledge to our students. The questions in Figure 1 are mostly adapted from the Cornell University Library (2015) and the University of Maryland Libraries (2014). These websites contain useful information for evaluating the credibility of online resources and are well worth visiting.

Each question isolates a different indicator of the legitimacy of the website and thus helps the teacher or learner evaluate the overall trustworthiness of the website's content. These questions equip teachers and learners with the tools they need to better discriminate between effective and ineffective resources. The teacher may ask himself or herself these questions to evaluate websites being introduced to the learners. Alternatively, depending on the language proficiency and maturity of the learners, the teacher may introduce the questions to the learners and let them evaluate the website.

As we ask ourselves these questions, we also need to use our own judgment and be willing to allow the website some leeway. Because we are accessing somewhat unconventional user-generated Web 2.0 resources, we need to remember that they may not always strictly adhere to traditional indicators of website quality. For instance, when asking about the qualifications of the author, we need to bear in mind that much of the content generated in these online spaces is put there by language-learning hobbyists rather than professional language teachers. That being said, if several of the website-evaluation questions are generating unfavorable answers, then it is probably safe to assume that the resource is not trustworthy. Probably the easiest way to judge the effectiveness of an online language-learning suggestion, besides evaluating the quality of the source, is to try it for a while and see how well it works for you.

Teachers also need to be prepared for the fact that some Internet enthusiasts are disparaging of traditional classroom-based language learning. Therefore, teachers may decide to glean valuable information from the sites themselves and pass it on to their learners rather than sending them to those sites. In the case of more mature students, teachers may want to use some of the activity ideas in this

1.	What is the background of the author? Do the author's qualifications lend credibility to his or her assertions and opinions? Can I contact the author?
2.	What is the author's goal in writing the content, and why was it written? Is the page actually advertising in disguise? If so, the content should be viewed with skepticism.
3.	What ideas or opinions does the author put forth? Does the author appear to be biased?
4.	What kinds of comments or feedback does the author get from other users of the site? Do others seem to find the information useful?
5.	Does the advice being given agree with what you know as a teacher and learner to be effective for language learning?

Figure 1. Website-evaluation questions (Cornell University Library 2015; University of Maryland Libraries 2014)

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article and to devote class time to discussing negative aspects with learners. These discussions should enable learners to be more critical consumers of these resources. The main consideration is to gauge the learners' maturity level before recommending these resources.

AN OVERVIEW OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Many English-language teachers may be unaware of online resources and communities and, as I did, may look more to traditional sources of information like books and trade publications for their teaching ideas and inspiration. Naturally, these traditional resources continue to serve as the main source of our professional development, but online resources can add valuable information for language teachers and learners if we give them fair consideration.

Before we discuss these online resources, all of which can be found through a Google search, a brief description of online language enthusiasts must be sketched out. They are actually a somewhat loose association of individuals and groups whose membership may or may not be connected to one another. They comprise essentially three groups: (1) polyglots (learners of multiple languages); (2) learners of various world languages (e.g., Thai or Cherokee); and (3) learners of English as an additional language (EAL). These groups may differ somewhat in that polyglots might discuss topics related to learning and maintaining several languages, while world-language and EAL learners tend to stick with only one language. But they are similar in that they generously share the language-learning tips and techniques that have worked for them, insights into the target language and culture, and their own personal struggles and triumphs as language learners.

These three groups can be further subdivided into bloggers, vloggers (video bloggers), commenters, and language-learning communities such as italki or language-learning forums like that found on How to Learn Any Language. The bloggers typically focus on written blog posts, while vloggers tend to produce spoken video posts on sites like YouTube. Commenters (who are often also bloggers or vloggers) are those who leave messages in the comments section of others' blog or video posts. They may share their own perspective on the issue being discussed or attempt to address what they perceive to be omissions in the original post. These comments are often worth reading because the insights offered in them can be just as helpful as the original article or video.

SAMPLE RESOURCES

This section offers examples of resources for language learners, with a brief discussion of how the resources might help. First, there are the language-learner blogs. These include well-known ones like The Mezzofanti Guild, A Woman Learning Thai, All Japanese All The Time, and Espresso English. The benefit of the EAL blogs is that they address questions, issues, and concerns that are unique to English-language learners, such as specific issues with English pronunciation or potentially confusing aspects of English-speaking culture. Other blogs offer free advice on methods for autodidactic language learning and self-management that the host and his or her guest bloggers have found helpful. They also often support online communities through their associated message boards or forums (e.g., How to Learn Any Language; Learn English Forum; and Englishforums), where learners congregate to discuss blog content and related issues as well as support one another's language learning.

Video blogs or "vlogs" can be found on YouTube and other video-sharing sites. Vlogs are similar in content to blogs but are typically presented in the format of a video of the vlogger talking to the camera or engaging in a conversation with someone else. Examples of these include the YouTube channels for The Linguist on Language, Fluent in 3 Months, and Laoshu505000. Vlogs are convenient for those who would rather listen than read through pages of blog posts. You can also find videos online from polyglots who learned EAL: Luca Lampariello, Ivymuse, Loki2504, and Hyunwoo Sun, among others. In their videos, they usually discuss what they did to learn English, often as a foreign language in their home country. These resources are particularly inspiring for our students who are English-language learners themselves.

Lastly, there are the online language-learning communities that have grown up on sites such as italki and busuu. In essence, these

tips and techniques as well as potential pitfalls to avoid. For instance, as a learner of Korean, I have benefited from Steve Kaufmann's admonition to listen and read a lot (www.thelinguist.com) as well as from Benny the Irish Polyglot's advice to get over my fears and speak a lot (www.fluentin3months.com). Likewise, the sites often introduce helpful tools (usually free) and resources, for which they offer apparently honest reviews.

In my own experience, I have followed recommendations by downloading a free online flashcard software called Anki that adapts to the learner's ability to recall vocabulary. Words that are recalled easily are shown with decreasing frequency, while those not remembered are shown more frequently. I also used a free software program for reading known as Foreign Language Text Reader (FLTR). This tool allows learners to import any target-language text in order to quickly define new vocabulary. Users can color-code

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websites enable language learners to connect with online teachers and language partners while also incorporating some useful features of social networking. In the case of italki, learners use Voice over Internet Protocol software similar to Skype to do language exchanges with other speakers of their target languages around the world. Busuu is more like a social-networking site that enables learners to connect with one another via a Facebook-type experience. However, it also has language-learning lessons and other content.

BENEFITS TO TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

These online resources are typically produced by successful language learners who discuss the activities that helped them. The primary activity that benefits teachers and learners is information sharing about language-learning

the words in the text according to how well they know them and change the colors as their word knowledge improves. I also followed a suggestion to engage in extensive listening through viewing same-language subtitled television shows that interested me, with great success. Admittedly, while I had heard of this idea before, there was something compelling about listening to others' successful experiences with it that made me willing to overcome my initial frustration and grow to enjoy it, vastly improving my listening skills in the process.

Along with offering battle-tested advice, online enthusiasts serve as models of successful language learners. Students might see a bit of themselves in their fellow learners and realize that it is possible to become competent in the target language. This awareness gives learners extra motivation to push through the inevitable

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challenges they face. For instance, many Internet language enthusiasts serve as role models because in a lot of cases they grew up in monolingual rather than bilingual households and did not take an interest in language learning until adulthood. Through their own example, they show adult learners in particular that language-learning potential does not end at adolescence.

These enthusiasts and their websites also offer a community of fellow language learners who provide learning and emotional support. In these spaces, learners can and often do reach out to others to offer and seek encouragement. For example, the "Add1Challenge" first suggested on the Fluent in 3 Months website inspires students to connect with others to keep themselves accountable as they learn their target language. As part of this effort, from time to time users post videos of themselves speaking to other accountability partners in the target language to maintain momentum and inspire others. Some well-known YouTube users collaborate with each other in interviews that allow their viewers to benefit from the synergistic insights that often occur when people with substantial knowledge and experience come together to talk about their common interest. Online language exchanges like italki are virtual communities where learners connect to groups across the globe to practice their target language with others and feel part of a community with a shared interest.

A SUGGESTED SEQUENCE OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

As language learners themselves, many language teachers are uniquely positioned to model the enthusiasm and resourcefulness of passionate learners for their students. This is true whether the teacher is a monolingual native-speaker of English who is just beginning to learn a second language or a non-native English-speaking teacher who is refining his or her understanding of the intricacies of English. Therefore, engaging with these kinds of resources together as a team has the potential to benefit both the learner and the language teacher. Teachers' experience as learners of English or other languages gives them valuable insights they can use to evaluate and share the effectiveness of the suggestions from online enthusiasts. Teachers can also incorporate ideas gleaned from these resources to improve their own language-learning methods and language ability.

The following four-phase activity allows teachers to draw on their expertise as language learners to try out the online resources and evaluate their effectiveness before they share the sites with their learners. After teachers introduce language-learning communities, students evaluate the content, experiment with the resources, and report to classmates what they found; they can then compare the various tips and suggestions; and finally they may participate in the communities themselves.

PHASE 1: TEACHER INTRODUCES AND DEMONSTRATES RESOURCES

Goal: To introduce students to language-learning enthusiasts' suggestions and tools

Skills developed: Language-learning strategies; ways to use various language-learning tools

Materials needed: Computer or mobile device with Internet access; checklist of questions to evaluate the source (e.g., blog, vlog); copies of recommended apps or software

Procedure:

1. The teacher accesses a language enthusiast's blog, YouTube channel, or online forum and uses the website-evaluation questions provided in Figure 1 to assess the quality of the resource.

2. If the teacher decides the resource contains credible information, he or she views or reads through the materials provided and takes note of suggestions for language-learning strategies or tools such as apps that the resource author has found to be useful.

3. In class, the teacher tells students the information and/or demonstrates the recommended tools. The teacher shares suggestions for how to learn the target language more efficiently based on language enthusiasts' experiences, demonstrates and reviews various language-study products and resources, and shares inspirational personal stories of successful learners.

   An example of such a lecture or demonstration is the teacher introducing the Anki flashcard program mentioned above. The teacher might share information about how the free app allows learners to memorize vocabulary more efficiently and then demonstrate how to download and use the program. The teacher can also relate a story of an enthusiast who had success with the app.

Teacher screening and presentation of these sites is probably the safest way to introduce the content to students because a teacher-directed presentation allows the instructor to filter out the more negative aspects, if there are any. In this regard, the presentation would probably be best suited for younger learners or those who have not had a lot of experience with critical consumption of media.

Alternatively, depending on the maturity level of the students, the teacher could direct them to the sites to explore the resources themselves and then engage in classroom discussion of the suggestions found on the sites. If teachers encourage students to connect with these communities directly, they should carefully consider how to monitor this experience to make it as safe and productive as possible. Phases 2–4 below offer a way to guide learners' initial interactions with online resources so that they receive maximum benefit while minimizing possible hazards. In general, teachers should always remember to preview any content and review guidance for Internet safety such as that found on sites like www.fbi.gov/fun-games/kids/kids-safety.

The series of hands-on activities explained below gradually orients learners to online resources as they develop their English ability and reflect on their language learning. Each activity builds on those that came before and scaffolds learners' interaction with the resources while providing increasing autonomy to the learner. Eventually, learners are even given the opportunity to contribute to the resources themselves if they choose.

PHASE 2: LEARNERS SELF-EXPERIMENT AND REPORT TO THE CLASS

Goals: To enable learners to use various tools to help them comprehend the content of the resources; to help learners review the resources and identify potentially helpful advice; to support learners as they follow online enthusiasts' advice and report results to their peers

Skills developed: Use of online tools to facilitate text comprehension, media literacy, and oral presentation; critical literacy to evaluate the effectiveness of language-learning suggestions

Materials needed: Computer or mobile device with Internet access; notebooks for journals

Procedure:

1. In class, the teacher introduces and demonstrates several software tools that facilitate students' comprehension of the content on the language-learning enthusiasts' websites, such as Google

Translate, automated summarisers for blogs (e.g., textcompactor.com), or the subtitles feature for YouTube. The teacher also discusses the website-evaluation questions in Figure 1 to prepare learners to critically evaluate the resources.

2. The teacher assigns a project that has students visit two or three popular blogs, YouTube channels, or social-networking sites to glean one or two pieces of language-learning advice from each source.

3. Learners follow the advice for a period of time (e.g., a week) and record their experiences in a journal. For example, learners could document which advice they followed, the steps they took in implementing the suggestion, and even include a graph of words memorized, pages read, or other measures of their progress.

4. Learners give a brief oral report to their classmates on the results of their self-experiment. They might talk about how they located the advice, explain what the advice was, describe their attempts to follow it, and tell whether they felt the advice helped them.

In addition to providing language learners with new strategies, this activity enables them to develop media literacy by thinking critically about the content of these resources and putting the authors' claims to the test through self-experimentation. Phase 2 also allows learners to share their results and conclusions with one another.

The third phase brings together the language-learning ideas that students have collected and allows them to compare the ideas' effectiveness.

PHASE 3: CLASS DISCUSSES THE PROS AND CONS OF THE SHARED ADVICE

Goal: To allow students to collaboratively evaluate suggestions and tools found online

Skills developed: Media literacy; presentation of ideas; discussion and debate; application of language-learning strategies

Procedure:
1. As a follow-up to the self-experimentation activity, learners discuss the effectiveness of the various self-learning suggestions they tried. Learners then compare the activities they found to be most helpful and motivating based on their self-experimentations.

2. Discussions should be structured so that each learner orally presents the one or two most effective tips from the resources he or she accessed.

3. Others are invited to comment on whether they tried the method and whether it did or did not work for them while also explaining why. The teacher should also encourage learners to suggest adaptations or variations that they found to be helpful.

4. The class develops a set of criteria to evaluate the online suggestions. Collaborating to generate criteria allows students to critically reflect on the essential features of beneficial language-learning advice. Using the criteria, the class votes to rank the language-learning suggestions in terms of their perceived usefulness. This stage helps learners think carefully about the merits and drawbacks of each suggestion.

This activity prepares learners for the final phase, which takes the language-learning ideas students have discussed in the classroom and moves them back online by encouraging them to become contributors to the sites they have been learning from.

PHASE 4: LEARNERS CONTRIBUTE TO ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Goal: To enable students to share language-learning suggestions and tools with an authentic audience beyond the classroom

Skills developed: Creating a class blog or YouTube channel; developing content to share online

Material needed: Computer or mobile device with Internet access

Procedure:

1. The four-phase sequence culminates in learners actually participating in online communities of language enthusiasts. For example, the teacher assigns and assists learners to write online comments on the forums, blogs, or YouTube videos that benefited them.

2. The teacher encourages learners seeking a greater challenge to join an online Skype group (e.g., italki) and report to the class about their experience interacting face-to-face with other language learners.

3. The teacher creates a class blog that shares what students felt they learned from the resources they explored and communities they participated in.

4. Alternatively, with appropriate permissions obtained, learners can create a YouTube video. The video would incorporate the best tips from their research, adaptations to existing advice that they liked, or recommendations for learning strategies they developed themselves. This activity allows learners to add their own voices to the global language-learning conversation.

Students benefit from engaging in these tasks by improving their ability to reflect on their language learning and developing their media literacy. Participation in these online communities also allows them to connect with and learn from other language learners and see themselves as knowledgeable contributors to the online community of language-learning enthusiasts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The apparent disconnect between language teachers and language-learning enthusiasts is unfortunate because each group has much to teach the other. However, neither group seems particularly interested in sharing its accumulated knowledge and insights, even though such sharing would benefit English teachers and their students. In particular, there is a lot of useful information about tips and techniques for efficient language learning, role models of successful language learners from all walks of life around the world, and emotional support via the online communities that have arisen around the language-learning sites.

The ideas presented here have important implications for the education of English-language learners:

- The techniques for efficient language learning through these online resources are mechanisms for students to become more autonomous. In an era of language teaching that increasingly demands that teachers find ways to foster learner autonomy, these resources offer a viable means to accomplish this historically elusive goal.

- The emotional support via the online communities and the role models they provide introduce learners to target-language speakers with whom they can engage in authentic conversations. These communities have the potential to create genuine student buy-in and investment (Peirce 1995) in language learning that currently does not exist in many foreign-language classrooms because learners often fail to see the true value of learning the second language.

- Online resources offer a space for collaborative learning with others around the world. Collaborative learning experiences encourage students to become the critical thinkers necessary for the globalized knowledge economies in which we live. Besides, students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is being taught, retain the information longer, and appear more satisfied with their classes (Goodsell et al. 1992).

Online resources offer a space for collaborative learning with others around the world.

The potential of these resources is immense. Ignoring the possibilities for our classroom is a missed opportunity for our students to join a trend that could revitalize our language teaching and their learning.

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