

The Criteria Of Language Learning Website

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Abstract : This research attempts to investigate the important elements in language learning websites based on the preference of future English as Second Language (ESL) teachers. Apart from that, other purposes of this study are to investigate the purpose of accessing the websites as well as additional elements that can contribute in improving language learning websites. Subjects are taken from final year undergraduates taking Teaching English as a Second Language as their major. A set of questionnaires was used to collect data and the data were analyzed using quantitative and descriptive analysis. Evaluation was based on frequencies and averages. The findings of this study show that the Internet is one of the most popular sources for learning a language, and websites that introduce language learning are found to be very useful and had been accessed frequently. Users accessed the websites mainly to search for language notes, activities and materials. The elements contributing to the importance of language learning websites are the language of the text as well as users' control. This study can be used to improve existing language learning websites or to be referred as a guide for future website development.

Katakunci : criteria, language learning website

Introduction

There are millions of websites found on the Internet and the amount increases by day. The number makes it possible for users to have more freedom in choosing whichever sites that are beneficial to them. If a particular website does not satisfy their needs, they will leave and look elsewhere (Nielsen, 2000). Thus it is important that websites provide usability as well as other design criteria for it to attract users to use them (Shneiderman & Plaisant 2005, Nielsen 2000).

The website elements that consider the users' desires can be divided into two categories. The first is on the site itself. This includes the navigation system, capability for texts to be read and time needed for a webpage to appear (Nielsen, 2000). The second category focuses on the target users. Users from different background have different interests and needs. Thus the elements include the age of the users, cultural and personality differences as well as international diversity (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2005). Websites that do not consider these elements or criteria have higher chances of being desolated by the users.

Therefore in order to make the website works well for users, website designs should be evaluated for their role in providing short learning times, rapid tasks performance, low error rates, ease of maintenance, and high user satisfaction (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2005). Web designers should consider both users as well as the website for it to be effective for its target users.

Statement of Problem

A teaching profession is faced with a multiplicity of demands (Wood, 2006). A teacher does not only teach, but serves as a mentor, facilitator or guide to their students. Thus a teacher is expected to know matter from common to complex. In relation to this, teachers should be able to answer which language learning website is effective enough to be used by students.

Since teachers devote half of their life being with their students, they are the ones more likely to know their students better in terms of background, language proficiency, and style of

learning. However, with thousands, perhaps millions of language learning websites that are now found on the Internet, it is almost impossible for the teachers to select which fits well with their students needs. Lynch (2002) stated that many educational institutions and corporations have approached the development process as a reaction to perceived competition for students, instead of as a project to enhance student learning. This goes the same for developing language learning websites. Lynch also stated that Web-based education had increased in courses and study opportunities; however the consequences of absence of strategic planning can be seen afterwards such as refusal to teach online and protests over receiving insufficient feedback.

With the statement above, it can be seen that the planning language learning website development should be improved with the collaboration of teachers. In order for the teachers to grasp and implement Web-based learning to the fullest, their suggestions on what should be in a language learning website are important. Thus this research is dedicated to find out English as Second Language teachers' propositions of the crucial elements needed in language learning websites. This research will answer three different questions: What are the elements of language learning websites? What are the uses of language learning websites to TESL trainees? and What are the elements that attract their attention?

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To determine the elements of language learning websites
2. To investigate the reasons for TESL trainees accessing language learning websites
3. To identify the elements of the language learning website that attract the attention of TESL trainees

Significance of the Study

This study could be used by English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in identifying the types of language learning websites that can benefit most when implementing them in classrooms. Elements that are introduced will help the teachers find websites that suits their teaching methods and needs. Thus teachers will not have to waste time surfing through websites that could not provide the necessary needs to them and the students.

ESL teachers are also required to design and construct new sources for language learning. This could be in a form of modules, reference books or courseware. Therefore, this study offers information of the necessary elements which should be implemented in language learning websites. ESL teachers can use this study as a guide or reference when constructing their own courseware.

This study could also help Malaysians who are interested in designing language learning websites that focus on their own culture and language learning styles. Therefore, web designers can offer language learning websites that suit the level of proficiency as well as the culture of Malaysia.

Web-based learning (WBL) had been introduced in the late 1990's and since then, studies had been conducted to find the significance of this method. However, there are still insufficient studies that cater both WBL and language learning. Thus this study could help contribute in the research of language learning through the websites.

Research Designs

The methods used in this research were a combination of the qualitative and quantitative methods. For the qualitative method, text analysis was used to evaluate language learning websites. Items that were evaluated using the text analysis were the elements of web design such as navigation, multimedia, language, texts and so on. The findings for this method answers to research question number one. The data from the text analysis were used to develop questionnaires in finding future English as Second Language teachers' preference of the language learning website. This quantitative data from the questionnaires answered to research questions number two and three.

For text analysis, the samples were taken from six frequently accessed language learning websites found on the Internet whereas questionnaires were answered by 43 undergraduates taking Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The data were analysed using Microsoft Excel.

Research Instruments

The research instruments used to collect data for this study were text analysis and questionnaires.

Text analysis, as the name suggest, analyses the content, structure or linguistic feature of a literature. It is used to find the collocations and concordance of a text. In this study, text analysis was used to find the frequency and pattern of elements used for website designs such as content organization, layout designs and types of activities provided on the website. The data collected from the text analysis were then used to develop questionnaires.

A set of questionnaires were developed to find future English as Second Language teachers' preference of language learning websites. The questionnaires were separated into four sections; demographic information, purpose of accessing language learning websites, preferred elements of web designs as well as recommendations to improve the websites. The demographic information was useful to find the respondents' experience dealing with language learning websites. Questions such as through what sources they use to learn a language and how frequently they access language learning websites determined the significance of the websites. The respondents' purpose of accessing language learning websites was determined by ranking several reasons. This could be used to help language learning websites in setting their objectives similar to the needs of the users. Elements of web designs preferred is useful to investigate which criteria should be put into more concerned when constructing a website. Questions asked involved ranking for purpose and preference as well as open-ended questions for comments and recommendations.

To obtain the answers of why language learning websites are accessed, several reasons are given for the respondents to rank. The following are some examples of reasons taken from the questionnaire:

1. Improve own language
2. Search for lesson plans
3. Search for classroom activities
4. Download audio/video to use in classroom

The respondents are required to rank 10 given reasons from most important to least important. The results from this item answer to the essential contents that language learning websites should have.

For the elements preferred in language learning websites, the following is an example of questions asked:

Table 1: Example of Questions for Elements Preferred

Content

No	Element	VI	LI	NI
1	User Level (beginner, easy, level 1, etc)			
2	Learning Mode (student centered, teacher centered)			
3	Language Skills (reading, writing, listening, pronunciation, etc)			
4	Language Component (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc)			

The table shows that the list of elements is categorized into its specific group. In this example, user level, learning mode, language skills and language components are categorized under content. Each element in the table is provided with examples so that the respondents will understand better of what it illustrates. For this question, the respondents are required to select either one of the three categories; Very Important, Less Important and Not Important. The description of each category is stated below.

1. **Very Important** (element must be in all Language Learning websites)
2. **Less Important** (element should be in all Language Learning websites but is not crucial)
3. **Not Important** (element does not matter in Language Learning website)

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study were undergraduates who are taking Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) course in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. They were chosen for their experience and ability to choose what is best for learning a language. A total of 43 sets of questionnaires were distributed and evaluated. This study focuses on final year students who have experience surfing through different kinds of language learning websites especially during their teaching practice. Other than that, they had already taken the subject where they were required to do self-access language learning.

Data Analysis

From the earlier findings and discussions, it could be seen that each section has its own level of preferences and some elements even have effects on other. For example, the use of multimedia should consider the technical elements and attractiveness of the websites.

This section will look into the level of preference of the overall elements in each component which include content, activity, language and text, multimedia, layout and navigation as well as users' control. The results are put into percentage and can be seen in the following figure.

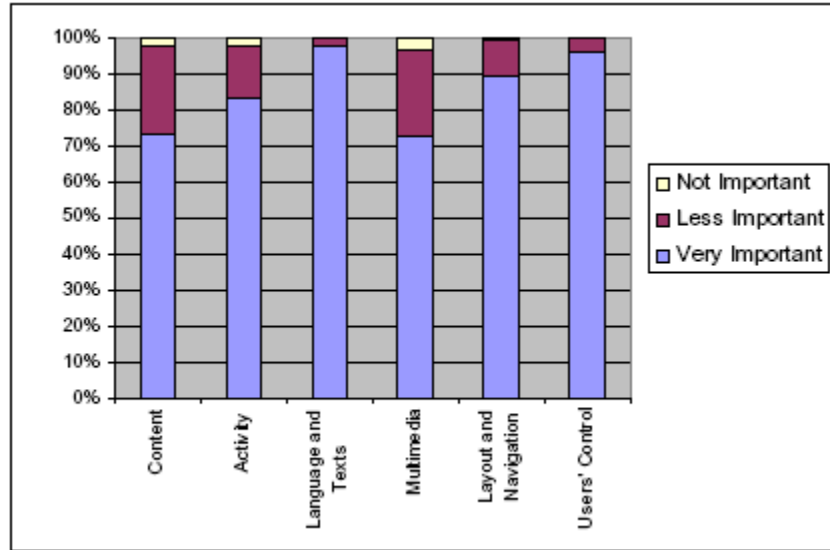


Figure 1 : Overall Preference on the Elements of Language Learning Websites

The results from above are calculated by dividing the total score for each component with the amount of elements which are found in them. Therefore, Figure 1 shows the average findings for all components discussed earlier. From the figure above, it could be seen that language and texts as well as users control both have the highest votes for its importance. This is followed by layout and navigation, activity, and lastly content and multimedia. As stated in the earlier discussions, the elements in language and texts could affect the reliability of the websites if it is not thoroughly supervised.

For users' control, its necessity in providing clear instruction and free access in surfing through the websites can both motivate users to carry on with what they are doing. Layout and navigation are important to organize the information and provide easier browsing. Activity and content hold fourth and fifth place since insufficient information can be endorsed by browsing through different websites. Multimedia came last since its benefits for language learning is limited. Furthermore, inefficient use of it in the websites can bring more damages than benefits.

In Section D of the questionnaire that had been distributed among the respondents, there are two questions which asked for additional elements that should be provided in language learning websites. After some filtering on the comments received from the respondents, the results are shown in the following table.

Table 2 : Additional Elements to Improve Language Learning Websites

Content	Multimedia	Navigation
Information Clear instructions Objectives Thesaurus	Audio, video Feedback Search engines Links	Interactivity User friendly Downloading time Print/download
Menu	Activity	Others
Buttons/icons Site map Credits Discussion Chat room Help menu	Learning styles Assessment Experience Culture Clues	Updates Free access Attractiveness

Other than the elements which have been discussed in the previous sections, most of the respondents posted comments on new category which is the menu. Most of the comments were on the menu for navigation which includes help menu, buttons and icons as well as site map. Respondents complained that most of the existing language learning websites did not concern about the importance of navigation buttons and icons. There were no back buttons where it should lead to previous page visited or a site map which reviews all pages provided by the website. Klassen (2003) agrees that easy navigation is important for keeping learners on-task. Too many obstructions in navigation build up anxiety to the learners. According to Shneiderman and Plaisant (2005), the anxiety can be reduced by giving freedom for the users to navigate the websites independently.

Other major concerns about the existing language learning websites are the culture appropriateness, updates and access to the website. For culture appropriateness, the respondents argued that most of the websites do not cater the needs of Malaysian learners. Most of the examples given in websites are biased to the culture of countries of the first language. Shneiderman and Plaisant (2005) agree that websites should cater universal usability. By taking the users' background into consideration, the websites can provide the maximum information based on the needs of different users. Other than that, the respondents also commented on websites that are not updated. Users will be frustrated if there is nothing new that he or she could learn or receive. They also complained that for some websites, users are required to pay before they could access the websites. It is more frustrating to know that they could not pay the fee because of the difference in currency.

With these complaints received from the respondents, it could be seen that the current language learning websites still have their deficiencies. Thus, the comments from the respondents could give benefits to existing website in correcting the faults which had been done or to enhance future website development. Therefore, their responses could be used to improve language learning websites.

Discussion

The results from this study indicate that when designing a language learning website, several elements must be taken into consideration to make the website usable by visitors. Three main components which include language notes, classroom activities and teaching materials should be prioritized in the content of the websites since they are being requested by most users. The elements that cater as the most important among others are the language of texts and users'

control. As a result, when designing a language learning website, these factors should be taken into great consideration since they are highly recommended by the users.

As for using language learning websites in classrooms, teachers should consider the elements mentioned in the earlier discussion to provide maximum exposure of information to the students. The findings from this study provide guidance for the teachers in selecting language learning websites that cater the needs of learners in everyway. The preferences of elements mentioned in this study were chosen by language learners themselves and thus creates a list of learning style preferred by students especially when learning through websites. Teachers could use this list as a way to vary their teaching and finding suitable language learning websites to be used by the students.

Besides that, the findings of this study show that learners are familiar with language learning websites. With the interactivity provided in these websites, learners could now learn language in a fun way. Thus this affects the teaching and learning process where teachers are compelled to provide as much activities and variations as what had been provided in the websites. Furthermore, the findings illustrate the recommendation that language learning websites be implemented in the classrooms.

The findings of this research are only true for final year students taking Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) as their major. In other words, it cannot be generalized and therefore, the same study needs to be conducted to various users of language learning websites to see if there are any similarities with the purpose of accessing the websites and their preference of the elements.

To compare the elements between the list taken from previous study and the ones found in existing websites, an observation had been conducted to six different language learning websites. Due to technical problems such as the Internet server, the amount of websites used for the observation is insufficient. Therefore, to receive a more accurate result for this study, more language learning websites should be used to make the comparison.

Another limitation of this study is on the elements themselves. Due to the limited amount of sources which could be found during the completion of this study, the elements analysed were from the general categories. The elements could be further elaborated and split into a more specific category. In order to make the list of elements cater all that are necessary for web design, a combination of list from various studies can be used.

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