

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 educational environment. As part of the examination requirements, students have to be able to use the Internet to find information and to gain experience with international communication, for example by using email. Investments in both time and money for this purpose are large, while the results are often hard to measure. Sometimes, computer literacy seems to be the only result of using computers in the classroom, the development of which may be a laudable goal, but is certainly not the responsibility of a language teacher.

Using the Internet for language teaching purposes can of course provide benefits, but whether they balance the investments remains to be seen. To aid in this process the author developed a short quizz consisting of a number of questions, the answers to which determine whether the necessary investment to using a particular site is worth it. A 'scorecard' makes this easy.

Costs

1. Do I as a teacher have the necessary skills to work with this site?
 - A. Different Internet sites demand different skills. The site of a newspaper, for instance, requires skills in using search queries.
 - B. A MOO (an object oriented MUD), a text based adventure game that can be used by several players at the same time, on the other hand requires knowledge of specific programs and the meta language (commands and the like) used on the site.
2. Do my students have the necessary skills to work with this site?
 1. 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.
 2. Do my 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, and 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 often requires specific software like, for instance, Realplayer. Is the necessary software available? If not, how much would be involved in getting it installed? Talk to your system administrator about this.
4. Can I implement the use of this site easily and quickly into my courses?
 - A. 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 takes a lot more time to prepare.

5. Is the site easily accessible?
 - A. 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 New Zealand) 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 much time to use, especially in a classroom situation.
6. Can the site only be used for the intended purpose?
 - A. Can my students visit other, inappropriate sites? When the site is on the local network this is of course more easy to control.
 - B. Can my 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 is the case when 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?
 - A. 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?
 - A. 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 my students learn other (non-language-related) skills that I 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 my experiences?
 - A. 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.

How to use the scorecard:

Answer all the questions 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”.

1. Do I as a teacher have the necessary skills to work with this website?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

2. Do my students have the necessary skills to work with this website?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		Major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

3. Is the necessary equipment for working with this website available?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

4. Can I implement the use of this website easily and quickly into my courses?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

5. Is the website easily accessible?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

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

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

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

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

8. Does this website offer possibilities that are otherwise hard to come by?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

9. Is the website motivating?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

10. By using this website, will my students learn other (non-language-related) skills that I value?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

11. Will others benefit from my experiences?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

12. Does the website have other benefits?

4	3	2	1		insurmountable obstacle		major advantage		score	
---	---	---	---	--	-------------------------	--	-----------------	--	-------	--

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.