



A guide to using the **Internet** with **young learners**

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1

Why should you use the Internet?

Do you teach young learners? Well, if you do, you need to start thinking about computer technology. The days when computers were something outside the core classroom are over. Today, computers are key academic tools. Students learn computer skills as naturally as they learn to hold a pencil. As teachers, it is our job to understand these tools and use them in ways that make the best use of their strengths. The goal is not to see computer technology in isolation but as an integrated part of the teaching process.

But before we proceed, let's talk a little bit about the concrete benefits computer technology, specifically the Internet, can provide. Here are some points I have identified:

Authenticity

The Internet provides students and teachers with a sheer inexhaustible supply of 'real' content in the target language. Read a real menu. Find out when a train leaves Paddington Station. Read a movie review in the New York Times. The Internet can compliment your course book by bringing language learning to life.

Meaningful language

Studies have shown that students learn language better when the language they are exposed to is meaningful. The Internet creates contexts for language use which, through their authenticity, become purposeful in the eyes of the students. The students actively manipulate the language for a clear and logical goal.

Interactivity

The Internet offers exciting opportunities for meaningful interaction in the target language. This interaction can take place between the students and native speakers anywhere in the world. The interaction can be asynchronous (email) or synchronous in the form of audio chats or voice and video messaging. Worldwide project networks exist to promote cooperation between schools around the globe.

Promotes critical thinking skills and 'constructivist' learning

On the Internet, knowledge is transient. Unlike course books which transmit information in a predictable order, working with the Internet is constantly evolving. Students make choices and 'construct' knowledge every time they go online. Each search is unique.

Promotes differentiation

Multimedia options allow us to 'scaffold' information for learners. The ability to listen to a recording, watch a video, read a text, or 'drag and drop' sentences, to name but a few ideas, means that we can present material in ways that satisfy many student learning styles.

Less focus on the teacher

Working with the Internet can take the focus off you and shift communication from teacher-student to student-student. If you are a non-native speaker and a bit unsure of your own English-language skills, authentic listening and reading from the Internet can help model the language you want to teach.

Encourages creativity

Children can make truly professional looking multimedia presentations with little extra knowledge. This ability to create 'publishable' work increases a feeling of ownership by the students which in turn has a positive influence on the quality of language the students produce.

Increases motivation

Finally, Internet-based work can increase motivation. It is colourful, exciting, and undeniably 'cool'. Computers and the Internet are a key component of youth culture and lend language learning street-credibility.

2 Some special words about primary-age children and the Internet

Many of the comments and suggestions made here are relevant to older children and adults as well as primary age children. However, when working with primary age students we have certain special considerations to consider when integrating technology into our classrooms. Here are a few points to keep in mind:

Frame the learning

Young students need a clear context for their Internet work. They need to see connections and understand not only 'how' to do something, but 'why'.

Keep the learning active

Young learners have short attention spans. Be sure that the lesson you design is active. Make sure that the students are 'doing something' and not merely looking at a screen. This can mean: moving objects with a mouse, interacting with other users, or creating content.

Be clear about expectations

Students should be clear about what you want them to do. Set out a clear set of directions for the students to follow. Internet activities, while exploratory, need to be limited with this age group.

Model what you expect

Before you let students work independently on computers, be sure you model the steps you expect them to follow. For example, if you are creating a communication task based on email, demonstrate writing an email and receiving one. You can easily do this by simply writing an email to yourself. Let the students try such a 'self-mail' as well. Other tasks that should be modelled include:

- Cutting and pasting
- Dragging and dropping
- Typing in a url in the address bar of a web browser

If you are using additional software such as Powerpoint you should also model their basic functionality as well.

In addition to modelling procedure, it is important to present a model of a finished product. Create an example of a website, blog, or electronic portfolio for the students for reference. In this way, they have a concrete idea of what is possible with the technology.

Create groups with clear individual roles

One student can work the mouse, another type on the keyboard, while yet another directs the group or records information. Switch roles frequently so all students get equal chances in each role. You may want to use a timer to be sure that students switch roles regularly.

Allow lots of time

Be generous with your time estimates. Remember that you are engaging the students on a number of levels: cognitive, linguistic, and technical. They need time to think things through and experiment a little. The Internet is exciting, because it is exploratory. Give the students time to play with the medium (obviously within bounds of what is appropriate).

Make use of space

Internet activities are frequently a mixture of online and offline steps. Create space for the students to work collaboratively offline as well as online. That way they can move from one step to another without having to rearrange furniture or log on and off.

Arrange computers so that all students in a group of 4-6 have an easy view of the screen. If possible create space for their notebooks so they can record any information they may need for the task. Too tight quarters will encourage fidgeting and detract from the task.

Make sure YOU can see all computer monitors.

Students are curious and they may get off track and access sites that are either unrelated to the activity or, in rare cases, inappropriate. If the students know you can see what they are viewing, they will be reluctant to access forbidden content. Create an Internet log and ask all students to record each website they have accessed. You can check this log against a web browser's history, which lists all the websites a user has visited in a session. Please note, however, that history can also be erased.

Always remember that as exciting as technology can be, you are still a language teacher. Don't lose sight of your ultimate goal.

3 Planning Internet-based lessons

Let us assume that you have all the equipment you need and a nice fast Internet connection to work with. You also know how to use most of the technology. Now you need to think about how you are going to use the Internet in the classroom. The goal of technology is to support and improve learning. It is not an end in itself.

Select Websites

When selecting websites, consider the following questions.

- Is the language challenging?
- Is it supported by sounds or pictures?
- Are there any other contextual clues?

Some websites have either too difficult content or far too complex language for children to effectively exploit them. Here it is worth considering letting the children search mother tongue websites for information that they then report in the target language using phrases taught in class.

Define goals

In a communication activity, what are the outcomes of the interaction? When searching, what will the information be used for and how will the students work with it? Will they report information? Will it be used to draw comparisons with partners? Will the materials be used in a visual or audio presentation?

Decide on process

Once the goals of an Internet activity have been defined, attention can be turned to process. Do the students have the cognitive skills to perform the task you envision? Like with any other classroom activity, we need to be sure that the underlying task is conceptually appropriate for the age group. Have the children learned basic research skills? Can they classify objects or recognize patterns? Can they follow directions with a series of steps? Do they have knowledge of the world, countries, and customs? Can they organize their ideas in a logical order? Do they understand basic measurement concepts? Perhaps some students have the cognitive skills while others have the language ability. By grouping students accordingly, you can work from each student's strengths.

Introduce the topic

Set the stage by talking about the topic they will be working on. Elicit prior knowledge and go over key vocabulary.

Isolate the task

Many websites are full of information which can be confusing for the students and has little relevance to the task at hand. Before letting the students work independently, guide them to the elements of the website you want them to use. Demonstration is the best way to do this. If you don't have a projector to display a website, take a screenshot and copy it for the students.

Manage your time well

Develop clear steps for each phase of an activity. Avoid letting students undertake random web searches. They can easily lose track of the goal of an activity and end up randomly surfing the web. Provide students with a list of pre-selected websites to work with. This will limit wasteful time surfing unrelated links and keep the students away from inappropriate content.

If you are working with a partner school or organization, be sure to calculate realistic response times into your plans. Remember that your partners may be very busy and not respond immediately. Spend time setting the ground rules of a project with your partner. If possible get them to commit to a specific timeline.

Not every school is equipped with a large computer room where each child can work independently on their own computer. This need not be a problem. I would not recommend having each student work on individual computers anyway. If possible the children should work in small groups of 3-4. This way they can interact and help each other.

Even if you only have one computer, you can still conduct Internet project work. Split your classroom up into workstations. The children can move from station to station over the period of the class. You can either move among the groups monitoring their progress or be at a workstation of your own.

If you do have enough computers, this does not mean that all children must perform the same task. Perform a 'jigsaw activity' – ask each group to research a different aspect of the project. For example, in a travel project, one group can work on weather, another can check on airplane tickets, yet another can work on food. In this way you don't find yourself listening to the same answers over and over again.

4 A sample activity

Below is a sample activity for you to try. Don't feel that you have to follow the instructions word for word – they are suggestions. I hope that you will come up with variations all your own. If you do, why don't you email them to us at rbt@oup.com, and we'll put them on the *Resource Books for Teachers* website for others to read (www.oup.com/elt/teacher/rbt).

Me in Space

Goal: to compare conditions on different planets

Suggested Language: comparatives, superlatives, much/many, question words, present simple, numbers

Level: elementary and up

Age: 8 and above

Time: 45 minutes



Preparation: consult with your science teacher to see if the children have studied space already. If not, try and align this activity to their science lessons so that they have been introduced to concepts such as gravity before doing this activity.

1. Tell the children that many things on other planets are different than on earth. Ask them if they can think of any things they may know (for example, gravity, temperature, atmosphere).
2. Ask the children if they think a year on Mars is the same as a year on Earth? In small groups ask them to log onto the following website to find out: www.exploratorium.edu/ronh/age/index.html
3. Let each child type in their birthday and make a printout of the result.
4. Ask each group some random questions such as: How old is Tommy on Jupiter? Is Johnny older or younger on Venus than on Pluto?
5. Write down the question stems you want to use up on the board or as a handout.
6. Put two groups together and have them ask each other questions.
7. Get the entire class's attention. Tell the students that not only is your age different on other planets, but also your weight. See if anybody can explain why (hint: gravity).
8. Ask the children to log onto: www.exploratorium.edu/ronh/weight/ and check their weight on other planets.
9. Follow the procedure as in steps 3-6.

5 Basics: What do you need to get started?

A computer

Well, first of all you need a computer with a connection for the Internet. You may want to consider a computer with wireless Internet capabilities. Wireless connections can be very helpful in the classroom as they allow you to use the computers anywhere in the building. To access the Internet via a wireless connection you will need to have a router, a small device which you plug into your modem or telephone jack.

An Internet provider

In order to connect to the Internet you need to choose a company (IP) that offers this service. If you work for a school or other institution, you probably have an IP already. If you do not, there is a huge variety to choose from. Nowadays, so-called flat rates are becoming the norm in most countries. A flat rate is a (monthly) fee for unlimited access to the Internet.

An Internet connection

When choosing an Internet provider you should also think about the type of connection that is best for you. Avoid dial-up connections wherever possible as they are slow. Instead, shop for broadband access. Broadband Internet access is available via ISDN and DSL telephone lines or via the same lines you use for cable TV. If you choose to use telephone connections, you may have to switch your telephone lines from analog to digital systems. Ask your telephone company for details.

Web browser software

To surf the Internet you will need a special program called a web browser. Web browsers contain a number of useful tools such as bookmarks, which allows you to save webpages, and history which traces all the websites you have accessed.

The most popular two web browsers are: Internet Explorer and Netscape. However, there are many other options: a particularly popular one being Mozilla Firefox, which you can download for free on the web.



Plug-ins

Plug-ins are small software programs that increase capabilities of your browser. Nowadays, many of these plug-ins are built directly into the web browser software, but there are a few key plug-ins that you may need to download from the net.

- Adobe Acrobat Reader: this program allows you to read pdf files. Pdf files are formatted to be read by the Adobe Acrobat Reader on any computer.
- Shockwave/Flash: these programs allow you to watch animation on your computer.
- Realplayer/Quicktime/Windows Mediaplayer: these programs allow you to watch videos and listen to audio files.

A printer

You will certainly want a printer to print out hard copies of web pages or examples of student work.

Other additional programs

Winzip/Stuffit (for Mac): These programs allow you to 'compress' large files for sending and expand them again on the destination computer.

Virus protection software

Viruses are programs that can potentially harm and even destroy your data. There are many different types of viruses: spyware, which tracks your movements on the web, Trojan horses, and worms. There are a number of anti-virus programs available on the web, Norton/Symantics being the most popular. These programs work by subscription and update automatically when you connect to the Internet.

6 What should you be able to do?

You do not have to be a computer expert to get great results working on the Internet, but there are a couple of core skills you should have:

Search the Web

If you want to find something on the Internet you need to use a search engine, such as Google, or Ask Jeeves. There are hundreds of search engines available for free and people have personal preferences.

Search engines have tools to narrow your search. For instance, if you put your text in quotation marks, the engine will look only for these words together as opposed to searching for each one individually on a webpage. By putting a hyphen (-) before a word, for example: England - London, the engine will search for all pages with England in them which do not contain the word London.

Bookmark websites

Web browsers allow you to save web addresses and create your own web directory. These saved addresses are called bookmarks or favorites. You can keep them in folders according to topic or activity.

Use email

Email will certainly play a big role in your communicative web-based activities.

An email address is made up of a username (this is the person's mailbox), the symbol @ (for at), a hostname (the computer where the mailbox is located), followed by a dot and three more letters which tell you where the computer is located or what kind of organization it is. Some examples are .com for businesses, .uk (a country), or .edu for educational institutions.

Using email is done through email programs. Normally, when you buy a computer there is an email program already installed.

If you don't have an email program on your computer, another option is to get a free email account from the Internet. Yahoo, Msn, Google and lots of other sites provide this service. All you need to do is log onto their sites and choose a username and password – you're ready to go.

Use basic presentation software

Today it is very easy to create content for the World Wide Web. Web editors, software that allows you to create web pages, are very user-friendly and do not require any knowledge of html code. If you don't have a web-editing program, you can also work with common presentation software like Powerpoint and send the presentations via email.

7 **Glossary of Internet terms**

Blog

An online journal where a person or organization posts messages in chronological order. Blogs often contain many links and images.

Broadband

High-speed Internet connection which allows more signals to be sent at one time. It is known as broadband since it has wider space to allow for simultaneous transmission of multiple file types. If you want to enjoy the multimedia options of the Internet, you really need a broadband connection.

Browser

A program that allows you to view and access content on a website.

Cache

Memory in which information about websites (code, multimedia) is stored, so that your computer does not have to download it every time you return to a web page.

Chat

Online communication which occurs in 'real-time'.

Cookies

Small files sent by a website to your computer with information about you that the websites use when you attempt to log-on another time.

Cut and paste

Moving text or an object from one location and placing it in another. You can also copy and paste. In this case the object stays in its original location and a copy is placed in the new location.

Dial-up

A connection to the Internet via standard analog telephone lines. This type of connection is slow and not recommended if possible.

Download

To copy a file from an outside computer (website) to your own computer.

Email

Mail which is sent from one computer to another instantaneously. Email can be sent to multiple recipients and can include attachments such as written documents, pictures, or audio files.

Hardware

All the electronic equipment that makes up your computer system, including the computer itself, keyboard, cables, printer etc.

Jpg

A common file format for photographs and other images. The other common format has the extension gif.

Keypal

Like a pen pal except you correspond via email.

MP3

A common audio file.

Mpeg

A multimedia file – generally a video. You normally need a plug-in to watch one.

Operating system

The software that runs your computer, for example: Windows or Macintosh.

Upload

To copy a file from a computer to a server.

Website

A place on the World Wide Web made up of files organized into a hierarchy. The files can be in any digitalized form. Websites can also include email connections and chats.

8 Useful Websites

Here is a list of websites I have found very useful and fun to use. The first group of sites provides ideas and resources for teachers. The second group of sites is great for the students themselves.

For teachers

www.oup.com/elt/teachersclub

Lots of useful teaching materials and ideas. Has a Young Learners section.

www.countryschool.com/ylsig/

The website of the IATEFL Young Learners Special Interest Group. It has a rich and very well organized collection of links.

www.englishraven.com/main.html

A commercial site with lots of free material for teaching Young Learners. Based in Korea, the site is particularly valuable for teachers in Asian contexts.

www.enchantedlearning.com

Huge collection of ideas, worksheets, and projects for all aspects of primary education. Free and subscription sections.

www.blogger.com/start

Site where you can learn about blogs and create one of your own.

www.busyteacherscafe.com/web_tutorial/webpage_tutorial3.htm

Links to sites explaining how to create websites. Be sure to look at the homepage of busyteachercafe.com as well for lots of material for the young primary age group.

For students

www.oup.com/elt/students

Fun interactive games and activities for young learners.

www.yahooligans.yahoo.com/

A search directory focused on children. Since the content is screened for appropriateness, this is a good site to have your students start web searches.

www.howstuffworks.com/

A really fun place to learn about unusual facts.

www.exploratorium.org

A highly interactive, colourful, and informative site from the Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco.

www.nationalgeographic.com/kids/

Lots of simple activities and games suitable for language learners.

www.dfilm.com

Here students can create their own animated movies. Easy to use and perfect to practise target language structures.

About the author

Gordon Lewis is the author of *The Internet and Young Learners*, which has been shortlisted for the British Council Innovation Awards 2006.