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The evaluation of websites teaching english as a foreign language (efl)

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Abstract

English is the most commonly taught foreign language all over the world. As a result of this fact, materials designed for English language teaching has been increasing enormously. Besides coursebooks and other written resources technology integrated language teaching provides many materials for language learners as well. Websites might be regarded as online teaching tools which can be very effective resources both for learners and teachers. However, if the website which is aimed to use as a resource was not designed in an efficient way, it might lead to wasting time. In addition, not well designed websites might include wrong guidance for language development.

Taking the role of websites in language teaching into consideration this study focuses on the evaluation of websites designed for teaching English. For this aim, a questionnaire prepared for website evaluation was modified with the views of experts and results gotten from a group of students as the first step of ongoing project on the evaluation of language learning websites. Latest version of the questionnaire was given to totally 56 English language learners studying at the school of foreign languages. The learners stated how much they use the internet and the websites in their language learning and how find the websites they have been using. Learners also evaluated the websites of their own choice. Some suggestions were made with the help of the results.

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Introduction

The role of websites in learning foreign languages has been progressively increasing as a result of the developments in educational technology. As English is one of the most commonly taught languages, the numbers of English teaching websites have been developed accordingly.

Internet, computers, and online websites that contain well designed, established and evaluated pedagogical materials offer a significant potential for education (eg. Wang& Coleman 2009 cited in Kartal& Uzun, 2010). Aydın (2007:18) states that the Internet has been a chance for learners who learn English as a foreign language to improve their discourse, grammar, vocabulary and language skills in a real and natural environment. This fact has attracted attention of many researchers. However, Yang and Chan (2008) argue that even though there are many studies on developing general guidelines for evaluating educational websites, these studies are not that specific to have a practical value. As a result, needs of English learning website users are not yet met. Similarly, Lancien (1998) states that although there are many foreign language teaching websites, it may not be possible to ascertain that these are well organized, and pedagogically and methodically well established (cited in Kartal & Uzun, 2010). In sum, while language learning websites using Web 2.0 technology may offer great promise for foreign language education, there is a lack of research on how users currently use these sites for collaborative learning and social interaction purposes. There is also a lack of research on the pedagogical and technical usability of these sites and how potential language learners could use these sites to enhance their own language learning abilities (Stevenson and Liu, 2010:233).

Kartal and Uzun (2010) define characteristics of websites in three categories. According to them a good website should have a good, user-friendly design where each part and section should be clearly seen and easy to use, it should allow for easy transition between sections, the color should not tire the eyes, it should be able to use some other programs. In addition, a good website has to include some contextual features. Users should be able to find materials appropriate for the level, subject, or type of their choice, the materials should be up to date and authentic in order to match the needs and interest of the users, there should be materials of every type for every level and every subject, the available materials should be supported by extrinsic sources and programs, the exercises in the site should allow for customization and contribution of the users, the users should receive feedback and the construction of practice and testing tools should serve option for learners. A good website should have some pedagogical characteristics like having explanation and guidance about exercises, providing feedback and having appropriate materials for level and needs of the users. Stevensen and Liu (2010:236) also emphasize the importance of technical and pedagogical usability of online language learning environments because according to them the ease of use of a website may be just as important as the effectiveness of its learnability. In addition to this, according to Shield and Kukulska-Hulme (2006) components of usability includes idea of easy to learn and easy to use. So, a system with good interaction design should be easy to use and generally offer a better user experience.

Researchers tend to conduct studies on developing website evaluation criteria and website evaluation. Thus, developing evaluation guidelines by taking features of good websites provides a kind of decision making both for the learners and the students. At this step not only the comments of the experts but also the opinions of language learners play an important role. However, as it was stated by Liu and the others (2011:66) most studies focus on developing evaluation guidelines based on experts' comments or theoretical knowledge so the opinions of language learners are often neglected. Furthermore, the criteria should take multi-dimensional aspects of the websites into account. As a result, to develop an evaluation criteria for English learning websites based on both expert and learners opinions is still an important and challenging issue.

Purpose of the Study

This study is a part of an ongoing study on the role of websites in language teaching. The overall purpose of this study is to investigate how language learners evaluate the websites they use to learn English or other foreign

languages and how they perceive the role of websites for their language development. As part of this research, this study focused on the following research questions as below;

1. Do students use the Internet when they study English?
2. What is the level of satisfaction of the learners in using websites?
3. What is the overall evaluation of the learners on English teaching websites?

Data Collection Tool

In order to address research questions background information about the learners and site feedback were collected through a questionnaire consisting of a) demographic information, b) English learning and web experience and c) site feedback parts. The instrument was originally developed by Liu and the others (2008). The original questionnaire was given to 5 experts in English language teaching, computer science and curriculum development to take their opinions. Some modifications were made like deleting some items and changing wording. Some new open ended questions were also added to get more information from the students. After this step, first version of the questionnaire was given to the students studying at Linguistic department of a state university in Istanbul. They were given one week to complete the questionnaire as a part of their “language teaching methods” course and they evaluated an English teaching website of their own choice. After the analysis of collected data, the questionnaire was modified by adding some more questions. Latest version of data collection instrument consisted of 19 questions and two Likert scales. In site feedback evaluation part, participants evaluated a chosen website by the help of a scale of 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). In the second part, participants were asked to rate how useful each site was to improve different English skills on a scale of 1 (useless) to 5 (very useful).

Participants

Totally 56 students studying English at the school of foreign languages participated in the study. The university is a state university located in Anatolian part of İstanbul. All students have already passed central exam in order to be a student at the university and have to continue one year long English language preparation programme. After preparation year they will start studying at different departments like history, international relations and philosophy.

%37,5 (21) percent of the participants are male and %62,5'i (35) are female students. %69,6 (39) of the students are aged between 16-20, %26,8 of the students are aged between 21-25 and %3,6 of the students are aged between 26-30.

English level of the students is given in the table below

Table 1. English Level of Participants

English level	Percentage	Number
Intermediate	%87,5	49
Advanced	%12,5	7

In the study, information about how long the participants have been using computer and how long they have been learning English was gathered. This information is given below;

Table 2. Duration of Computer Usage and English Learning

Years	Computer Usage		English Learning	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Less than 2 years	% 7,1	4	% 26,8	15
2-5 years	% 12,5	7	% 17,9	10
5-10 years	% 44,6	25	% 39,3	22
10-15 years	% 28,6	16	% 16	9
More than 15 years	% 7,1	4	% 0	-

It is seen that most of the participants chose the option of 5-10 years both for computer usage and English learning. Therefore, it can be said that there is correlation between the duration of computer usage and English learning.

Information About the Internet Usage

%87,5 (49) of the participants stated that they prefer using PC while others %12,5'i (7) prefer using MAC. Participants shared information on where they access the Internet. They were able to give more than one answer for this question. Home comes as first place of the Internet access and university follows it as the second place of access. Analysis of their answers is given below.

Table 3. Internet Access

Place of the Internet Access	Percentage	Number
Home	% 87,5	49
Work	% 8,9	5
Dormitory	% 10,7	6
University	% 58,9	33

It was learned in the study that how much time they spend on the Internet per day. Daily internet usage of the participants is given in table 2.

Table 4. Daily Internet Usage per Hour

Daily Internet Usage per Hour	Percentage	Number
less than one hour	% 10,7	6
1-2 hours	% 39,3	22
2-4 hours	% 41,1	23
4-7 hours	% 5,4	3
more than 8 hours	% 3,6	2

The questionnaire included a question to learn for what the participants generally use the Internet. They were given seven options. Their responses were shown in the table below.

Table 5. Purposes of the Internet Usage

Purposes of the Internet Usage	Percentage	Number
Study	% 73,2	41
Research	% 76,7	43
Education	% 64,2	36
Entertainment	% 46,4	26
News	% 75	42
Shopping	% 35,7	20
e-mail	% 71,5	40

As it is seen on the table, research comes as the first reason of internet usage. Following news, study and using e-mail follow the option of research. Shopping is the least preferred reason to use the Internet.

In the study, participants were asked to rate their level of computer skills. Most of the students defined themselves as experienced users of the computer (%51,8) and less experienced users (%37,5) while only %7,1 of the students stated that they are not experienced.

Table 6. Computer Skills

Computer Skills	Percentage	Number
Not experienced	% 7,1	4
Less experienced	% 37,5	21
Experienced	% 51,8	29
Very experienced	% 3,6	2

The Role of Internet in Learning English

Participants were asked whether they use the Internet to study English or not. %87,5(48) of the students stated that they use the Internet to study English. On the other hand, a very small percent of the students (% 14,3)do not use the Internet to study English.

In the study, it was also aimed to learn how much the students like using the web to learn English. It was found that most of the participants %44,6(25) like using the Internet in learning English. Only %5,4 (3) of the participants does not like using the Internet at all. In addition, %19,6 (11) likes using the Internet a little, % 7,2 (4) likes it very much while %23,2 (13) does not like very much.

Participants gave information about how much time they spend on the Internet for studying English. According to results, %28,6 (16) spends less than an hour, %53,6 (30) of the participants spends between 1-2 hours and %17,9 (10) spends time between 2-4 hours.

The survey also included an open ended question in order to learn for what specific purposes is the Internet used while studying English. As all the participants did not give their comments not the information about the percentage but number of the participants is given in the table.

Table 7. Specific Purposes of Internet Usage in English Learning

Specific purpose	Number
Dictionary	6
Listening	5
Speaking	4
Reading	3
Grammar	3
Translate	2
Learning	2
Research	2
Understaning	1
Social media follow for agenda	1

As it is seen on the table, 6 of the participants use dictionary while studying English. Total number of the participants who use the Internet to develop skills (listening, speaking and reading) is 12. 3 students use the Internet for grammar. Translation, learning and research are each stated by two students.

Evaluation of Websites

Participants were requested to give their opinions about the website they use frequently in learning English. They rated their level of satisfaction with 5 scaled statements. The criteria consisted of totally nine statements. Each of them was evaluated separately.

Table 8. Evaluation of Websites Used for Learning English

Statements	Mean
1. Ease of finding the information/activities	3,5
2. Quality of information/activities	3,8
3. Ease of reading the text	3,5
4. Appearance of site, including colors and graphics	3,2
5. Speed of pages displaying	3
6. Fun, entertainment value	3
7. Overall learning experience	3
8. Ease of understanding the instruction for activities	3
9. Ease of moving around the site without getting lost	3,2

With the help of another 5 scaled criteria participants evaluated usefulness of websites in developing some skills including grammar and culture.

Table 9. Usefulness of Websites in Developing English

English Skills	Mean
Speaking	2,9
Listening	3,2
Reading	3,6
Writing	3,4
Grammar	4
Culture	3,3

Site feedback part of the questionnaire included a question on recommendation of participants. They gave their recommendation for the website they evaluated. According to results, %48,2 of the participants is not sure to recommend the website. %30,3 stated that they definitely recommend.

Table 10. Participants' Recommendation

Opinions on Recommendation	Percentage	Number
No way	% 7,1	4
I am not sure	% 48,2	27
I'll definitely recommend this site	% 30,3	17
No answer	% 14,4	8

Characteristics of Websites

The study included open ended questions in order to get more detailed information about website users' opinions and learn more about characteristics of a good website from language learners' perspectives. The participants were asked "what should an English teaching website include?". Their answers and the number of the participants for each answer are given below.

Table 11. Characteristics of Websites From Learners' Perspectives

Characteristics of English teaching website	Number
It should include listening part	6
It should include reading part	3
It should include speaking part	3
It should include useful information	3
It should include enjoyable games	3
It should include explanation on content	3
It should be understandable	3
It should include Exercises	2
It should include Unknown words	2
It should include scale of difficulty	2
It should include Everything	2
It should be easy to use	2
It should be colourful	1
It should be visual	1

Results and Discussion

This study is a part of an ongoing research on the evaluation of websites developed for foreign language teaching. As first step of the research, it was aimed to learn English preparatory students' views on using websites and the Internet in English language learning, to make them evaluate the websites they frequently use. For this aim, a questionnaire developed by Liu and others (2008) was modified with the help of the experts' views and students studying at Linguistics department. Latest version of the questionnaire was given totally 56 students studying English.

It was found in the study that almost all the students defined their level of English as intermediate. Most of the participants stated that they have been learning English between 5-10 years. Similarly, again most of the participants stated that they have been using computer between 5-10 years. Most of the learners find themselves as experienced computer users as well.

Home is the most preferred place for the Internet access. University comes after home for the Internet access. When participants' responses for daily Internet usage it was found that most of them spend between 2-4 hours on the Internet.

They were given options to the participants in the study to learn why they use the Internet. It was found that they mostly use the Internet for research and to follow news. To use the Internet to study and e-mail were also given among the most preferred reasons. They were also asked for what specific purpose they use the Internet in learning English. Dictionary comes on top of the list. Three language skills, listening, speaking, reading, follow the reason of dictionary.

The learners were asked to evaluate a website of their own choice. They firstly wrote down their favourite websites in learning English and then evaluated one of them. The results were analyzed together as the aim of the study is not to get information about the websites or evaluate each website separately but to learn overall evaluation of the learners as the first phase of ongoing study.

The learners rated their level of satisfaction for the website with the help of a scale from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (satisfied). There were nine statements in the site feedback part of the questionnaire. Mean of all statements is not less than three. It shows that all the participants are satisfied with the websites they chose. However, mean of quality of information/activities, ease of finding information/activities, ease of reading the text, appearance of site and ease of moving around the site got higher mean comparing to speed of pages displaying, fun, entertainment value, overall learning experience and ease of understanding the instruction for activities.

In site feedback part, the learners were also required to evaluate the usefulness of the website by rating between 1 (very useless) to 5 (very useful). Grammar got the highest mean. Reading, writing and culture followed the option of grammar. It was seen that speaking is the least preferred option.

Most of the students were not sure to recommend the website they evaluated whereas almost %30 percent stated that they definitely recommend that website.

It was aimed to learn what a website should include from the learners' views. Language skills are the most given parts for an English teaching website. Useful information, games and explanation were also stated among the characteristics of website.

After the analysis of the results it was seen that most of English language learners use the Internet to help their English language learning. There are various reasons for their usage. It might be concluded that learners who participated in this study are satisfied with the websites they have been using. Moreover, they find them useful to develop their language skills and their knowledge in culture.

For further research, weak points of the websites stated by the participants and their views on the components of the websites might provide useful information both for a much more detailed analysis of the websites and developing new websites appropriate for language learning.

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