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An examination of online grammar teaching materials available for young learners

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Abstract

The Internet is widely used in foreign language education both inside and outside language classrooms. The most important reason that makes the Internet a popular tool used in foreign language education is its great number of materials that are easy to access. Currently, theory of foreign language education supports the use of the Internet both as a tool as well as a resource bank. However, this paper posits that the Internet should not be seen as an accurate tool and resource bank especially when the place of grammar learning is taken into account. In this particular study, I critically examine grammar materials found online to understand their value from a communicative language teaching perspective. Results of this study show that although there are accurate and appropriate online materials that are prepared for the teaching of the grammar, many of these materials are traditional in nature without much communicative value. Hence, teachers and learners are invited to understand this fallacy characterized by relying on the Internet as a powerful, accurate, and appropriate tool and resource bank that can be used in foreign language education.

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1. Introduction

Foreign language teachers, like most teachers in other fields, believe in the power of the Internet as a tool as well as a resource bank of various educational materials. Teachers also experience the growth of various types of online materials that can directly be used in their language classrooms. One thing that we

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must understand as foreign language educators is that, in Al-Jarf's (2005) words, "despite all the glamour of technology, its use in language teaching does not guarantee students' success in skills acquisition nor higher levels of achievement than traditional classroom environments" (p. 167).

Grammar teaching has found new aspiration with the use of the Internet. There are numerous lively and attractive activities, games, puzzles, and worksheets available on the Internet for teachers' as well as students' use. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) states, according to the proponents of Communicative Language Teaching, grammar should be taught as a means to help learners "convey their intended meaning appropriately. Similarly, as she further argues, the teaching of grammar can occur deductively or inductively" by focusing "on meanings and functions of forms in situational context and the roles of the interlocutors" (pp. 132-133). At its most basic level, communicative activities are seen in opposition to non-communicative activities which are characterized by carrying no communicative desire or purpose, placing emphasis on the form rather than the content, and including one language item at a time (Harmer, 2007).

Research on the relationship between learning and teaching of the language skills and components and the use of technology has shown varying results. Arıkan and Khezerlou (2010) found that teachers of English, when comparing the superiority of computerized over paper-based materials, tend to believe that grammar can be taught adequately either way, unlike listening which can be learned or taught better with computers and writing which can be taught through paper-based materials. When the qualities of young learners as individuals are considered specifically, as Arıkan and Taraf's (2010) review of research has shown, young learners learn implicitly rather than explicitly. Such studies and classroom practices also support the view that accurate instructional materials must be designed so as to deliver foreign language instructional with the help of the computers (Stepp-Greany, 2002). Kartal (2005) further argued that foreign language learners who improve their language skills online need two types of guidance; functional (how to use it) and pedagogical (providing content-related help). Thus, it is expected that the online material with which a foreign language learner is working, should provide further help with which students learn comfortably.

Ministry of National Education's English Language Curriculum for Primary Education Grades 4 through 8 (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2006) states that games are fundamental to primary school learners' language development because they make young learners' learning meaningful while being motivating, contextualizing, and natural activities although emphasis was not put on the Internet in that particular curriculum. However, the new curriculum for the grades 2 through 8 has suggested and incorporated the use of the Internet (podcasts and e-mails) especially by means of project work (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2013). Thus, it can be said that the new curriculum for young learners has extended English language teaching to the Internet although this extension has not yet been studied in a detailed manner especially to understand the potential and uses of the Internet in foreign language teaching. Hence, in this study, I briefly look at some most popular foreign language learning websites and materials that are intended for young learners' use by discussing their value as grammar learning and teaching materials from a communicative language teaching perspective by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the nature of online grammar teaching materials in terms of being traditional as opposed to communicative materials?
2. Do these materials have potential in learning and teaching grammar especially when young learners are considered?

2. Method

In order to find answers to my research questions, I reviewed the websites and online resources by taking notes of their features. I tried to understanding their potential value by classifying them either as

traditional or communicative materials and took screenshots of each material. I reviewed only those materials that were free access. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I excluded those html materials that were, by nature, traditional materials very similar to those pen-and-paper materials.

3. Discussion of findings

British Council has valuable online materials such as puzzles, games, and videos that can be used by young foreign language learners. However, we can see that despite the quality of these materials, there are many traditional grammar teaching activities and videos that are the direct copies of traditional grammar teaching materials or situations. For example, in these videos (see Fig. 1, a), Gran (an elderly lady) teaches Kitty, a young learner, how to speak English by using some grammatical rules correctly. She says: “In English we can’t say some cheeses and a milk because they are both uncountable nouns... We have to say some cheese and some milk.” This example, despite coming from an online material, shows that it is rule-based and not meaning-focused, a view that is not supported by Communicative Language Teaching and other current approaches and methods that prioritize communication over learning of the rules. In other words, the only difference between this video and a paper-based activity in which a photo of these two speakers are shown is that the former is a motion picture while the latter can be accompanied by a listening text as a recording of their interaction characterized by teaching of the rules.



Fig. 1. Gran is teaching grammar to Kitty

The second example (Fig. 2.) is called “Sentence Monkey” which is supposedly an “interactive game” as so called by the website owners. A closer look at this game shows that it only includes a set of multiple-choice questions showing pictures to contextualize the language use just like those given in paper-based materials. Furthermore, as is, such a traditional fill-in-the blanks activity can hardly be called an interactive game. This point has already been made by Kartal (2010, p. 58) who suggested that “interaction is impossible without feedback.” Hence, foreign language learners must receive feedback in order to call an online material truly interactive.

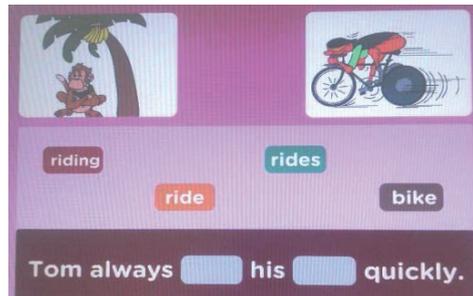


Fig. 2. Sentence Monkey

Some online grammar teaching materials provide language learners with feedback albeit via giving the correct answers. Although such materials have limited feedback opportunities, they can be helpful because they also give learners a chance to write (Fig. 3).

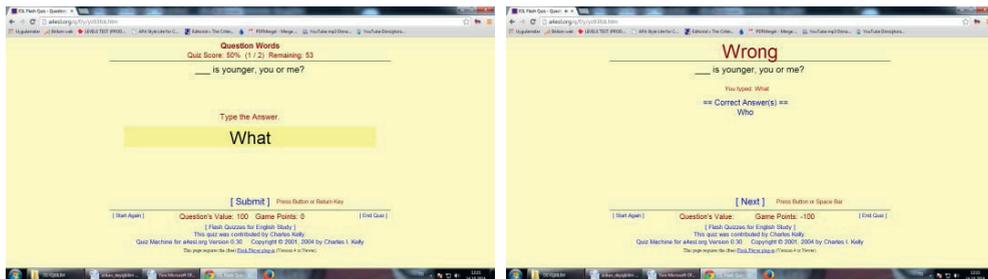


Fig 3. Providing online feedback (correct/wrong)

In some grammar materials, learners are given a chance to complete sentences by clicking the correct option among the options given. An extension to traditional grammar teaching, these materials can be helpful in mastering the knowledge of structures although their value as communicative materials is debatable. There are, however, some listening exercises for young learners in which learners listen to the script and tick the item described or talked about. These materials can be considered as communicative materials, although weak ones, since they have information gap while asking learners to participate in the process of listening. One sample set of exercises can be seen at <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/young-learners/>.

4. Conclusion

As Phillips (2001: p. 68) articulates, “young children are quick to learn words, slower to learn structures.” She further notes that “both vocabulary and grammar need to be taught in context and the children should always to be given plenty of opportunities to use the language that they have learned in class” (p. 68). Review of research by Arikan (2009) shows that although all grammar teaching activities can be considered as contextual activities at differing degrees, it should be kept in mind that teachers can contextualize their lessons “through numerous methods including (but not limited to), using audio or visual materials, bringing in realia and props, storytelling, problem solving, giving examples, showing grammar usage, playing games, and teaching explicitly or implicitly” (p. 90). However, especially when grammar is taught in a way that is too dependent on rules and memorization, young learners lose their

interest and motivation (Yolageldili & Arikan, 2011). Therefore, online activities which are one-dimensional and traditional in nature should be evaluated as an extension to traditional teaching and such applications should be used with learners cautiously if our aim is to create learning environments that prioritize acquiring language in natural communication. What we see as grammar teaching or practice materials online may be informative in nature, just like the traditional ones, but the way they are delivered also remains traditional although the medium has clearly changed from the confinement of the classroom to the confinement of the screen. This has been supported by the findings of Kartal (2010) who found that more than half of the online language teaching and practice materials he studied are traditional structural activities and games.

It was discussed above that non-communicative activities are characterized by carrying no communicative desire or purpose, placing emphasis on the form rather than the content, and including one language item at a time (Harmer, 2007). As the analysis of the online materials suggest, these materials are rather non-communicative in nature. Hence, teachers should be careful about the nature of such online materials for they will inevitably create boredom on students' part while continuing the rule-based tradition of grammar teaching alive. This, in return, will make young learners' dissatisfaction with online materials the result of which may be refraining from using them altogether.

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Online Resources

Fig 1: <http://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/en/grammar-videos/how-many-sweets>

Fig 2: <http://www.eslgamesplus.com/present-simple-tense-action-verbs-interactive-monkey-game/>

Fig 3: <http://a4esl.org/q/f/y/yz93fck.htm>