

Chapter 5.13

Improving Online Readability in a Web 2.0 Context

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ABSTRACT

This study describes a task-based assessment (TBA) approach to teaching reading and writing online. It then analyzes key factors emerging from the results of implementing this approach with graduate engineering students in Japan. It is argued that these factors should be considered when designing or assessing any online reading or writing course for ESL/EFL students. The findings of this study are especially relevant to task-based approaches and technical or pedagogical innovations which can help foster more effective and enjoyable learning for teachers and students in blended learning environments. It is hoped that this discussion can serve as a model of what can be done to enhance online EAP/ESP/ETP courses, as well as any other online reading or writing course being designed for speakers and readers of languages other than English. The goal in this chapter is to summarize research aimed at integrating some of the most useful Web sites for English language learning into a user-friendly system for optimal online vocabulary

development — which could be self-monitored by students as well as tracked by teachers via a course management system.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new types of electronic media such as blogs, wikis, mobile phones and social networking sites is having a profound effect on the way people communicate. This is especially true of written communication and therefore as a consequence also greatly affects the way people read and consume information. The high levels of familiarity that today's students exhibit vis-à-vis these technologies is set to have profound effects on the ways that foreign languages are taught in a Web 2.0 context. If students of English as a Foreign Language cannot comprehend the high level of vocabulary and technological jargon found online, messages will not be understood and learning will be impeded. Given the challenge presented by the new landscape of Web 2.0 communications, there are two main objectives in this chapter:

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1. To examine how best to assess and improve the readability of any website or application. Furthermore to indicate how a series of critical linkages can be formed to better integrate listening, glossing and translation so as to empower learners to better comprehend any Internet application or location.
2. Using the Virtual Language Education Links Library, known as the World CALL Language Links Library (Loucky, 2008), this chapter aims to identify which kinds of language learning sites and Web 2.0 functions are most helpful to Japanese graduate students vis-à-vis improving their online English reading and vocabulary skills. This World CALL Directory (found at www.CALL4ALL.us) is a Free/Open Source Language Education Resource Repository. Its aim is to serve as a Virtual Encyclopedia of all major language learning links, Web dictionaries and Computer-Assisted Language Learning organizations in the world.

In an age where multi-literacy and foreign language literacy in multimedia environments are becoming increasingly more important, teachers need to be able to understand and use more CALL technologies for efficient reading and vocabulary assessment to produce effective and enjoyable language development. The need for quick, easy and reliable readability checking for English reading texts has recently become more pronounced. Whether assessing print, online fiction or nonfiction texts for either Extensive or Intensive Reading (ER or IR) use, language learners and teachers

are in real need of helpful, user-friendly ways of assessing the reading levels of texts.

For over 50 years, readability formulas have been used to help guide students to books at their appropriate level of reading and interest. Briefly stated, it is very important for ESL/EFL teachers to be able to individually test their students to determine their actual reading instructional level. EFL teachers using extensive reading are still in a quandary about how to arrive at commonly understood reading levels for various publishers, who do not use a uniform system. Before deciding what reading methods or materials to use, English reading teachers need to realize that three different kinds of reading levels are most crucial to understand. These three categories of reading ability are 1) Frustration Level, to be avoided; 2) Instructional Level, which Intensive Reading and classwork may be done at; and 3) Independent Level, which is appropriate for Free or Extensive Reading. Table 1, adapted from Loucky (1996, p. 301) and (Ekwall, 1976, p. 267), illustrates what these different levels involve.

Three other types of reading levels should be considered and compared when trying to best match texts or books to students:

1. The readability level of a text or a book's grade level: a particular text's reading difficulty level has most commonly been measured by a given readability formula (e.g. Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch Kincaid Grade Level).
2. The interest and maturity level of a book or text's ideas and content (usually grouped by

Table 1. Reading level criteria

Reading Level	Word Recognition	Comprehension %
Free or Independent	98 - 99% or more	90% or more
Instructional	95% - 98/99%*	75 Ideal (51 - 89%)
Frustration	90% or less	Under 50%

Note. The asterisk indicates not more than 1/20 unknown words.

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