

Using E-learning to Teach Linguistics Courses

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E-learning has become the new frontier in education. Through Internet technologies anyone can access educational materials—at any time and at virtually any place. While the non-traditional student has the opportunity for true life-long education, traditional students in schools also benefit from the additional means of delivery of materials to be mastered.

Since the Internet is based primarily on written text, e-learning presents a special challenge for language learning, which in our times necessarily has an oral/aural component. Nevertheless, a number of good websites have been developed where students can practice listening skills (e.g., Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab). Most university students majoring in English are required, in addition to skills courses, to take some linguistics courses. Some aspects of linguistics, too, are best illustrated with spoken examples.

While useful supplemental materials may be available on the Internet, many teachers like to employ their own materials that they have collected over time. Language teachers have generally been rather reluctant to embrace computer technologies in their classrooms, and the few who do use it tend to assign reading texts or research from established sites. However, the dynamic aspects of computer delivery are seldom utilized, in particular the use of the spoken word.

The purpose of this session is to illustrate how ordinary teachers can go beyond the presentation of text and develop more exciting on-line materials to bolster students' motivation for learning. The focus is on the delivery of linguistics courses taught in English for Chinese students. The presenter has been teaching three undergraduate courses—Introduction to English (first year), History of the English Language (third year), and Varieties of English (third year); has taught them using on-line materials utilizing both the university's e-learning platform and her non-interactive website; and has gathered student feedback. Issues to be discussed in the session include types of text-based files and features of those files (e.g., font size, color, graphics), working with sound and video files, and utilizing the interactivity of an e-learning platform for homework assignments and quizzes.

Key Words: e-learning, teaching linguistics, English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Classroom teachers face a dilemma. On the one hand, feeling overworked, they take advantage of lessons previously prepared, by themselves or others, to save time. On the other hand, doing the same lessons in exactly the same way can quickly become boring, so teachers want to innovate, but then the time constraint quickly enters. This dilemma has become more pronounced in recent years as we now have a whole new way of delivering educational materials—the Internet. Teachers may want to try the new technology but fear they cannot learn to command it, and even if they could, they would spend too much valuable time.

Admittedly, preparing teaching materials and lessons is time-consuming, especially when one is incorporating a new technology. Nevertheless, as more people use computer applications in aspects of their daily lives, the distance between what we already know and what we need to know to develop on-line teaching materials becomes shorter and shorter. Many of us already have digital cameras and can perform simple editing before sending those vacation photos off to friends by e-mail attachment. Beyond that, it is relatively simple to insert that photo or any photo into a Word file as part of a handout or into a Power Point presentation or web page. Add a scanner, now a fairly cheap and simple device to use, and any visual image

can be turned into a picture file, so whatever you could do with those digital photos from the camera you can do with the scanned image. To put it simply, the digital camera for after school is just as useful in school.

Just because a technology exists does not mean it will be appropriate for use in an educational context. The question to be asked is “How can the technology be applied to make my teaching and, subsequently, students’ learning better (more efficient, more effective, more motivating, more fun for students and teacher)? Instead of trying to teach a whole course on-line, teachers can start simply by, for example, asking student to submit an assignment via e-mail; the teacher can e-mail a more individualized evaluation back to the student. Or they can ask students to read certain appropriate materials on specific websites. We can also find good listening materials on the web, such as audio broadcasts that start whenever we want, not just on the hour.

So one approach is to use some good sites already developed by others. Meanwhile, one can try building one’s own website. This may initially sound like a daunting task, but commercial providers such as Yahoo give you a template and you just fill in the content. You can start with your own CV and then add some vacation photos. Try creating something you will find useful for yourself then later extend the application to the classroom. By playing around with your own website, you might get some ideas for what you could do realistically with your students.

When teaching English majors in tertiary settings, in addition to skills courses, we also teach content, most often courses in literature and linguistics. Here we are concerned with using Internet technology to aid in teaching linguistics courses to EFL students. Unlike native speakers of English, who do not normally face language problems with the general content although they may have difficulty with some concepts, EFL students have to first be able to understand general English at a high enough level in addition to tackling the abstract concepts. This may mean that they need more supporting and supplementary material. For example, students may read material in a textbook in English written for native speakers and need a classroom lecture with lots of examples to understand. If the teacher is not going to use the students’ L1 but lecture in English, then she may want to use a lot of paraphrase.

In the past, this issue might only arise in foreign language departments, with native speakers of English lecturing in English to English majors, or in graduate divisions with international specialists who could not lecture in Chinese but had English as their second or third language. In these cases, the students involved had either enough specialist knowledge of English or the content area to negotiate meaning in English with their teachers. However, today in Taiwan this is actually quite a serious issue because major universities are actively pursuing a policy of teaching some content courses in English—for all areas and levels of study. Undergraduate students in particular are affected by having to learn content in a language they do not command well.

In the subsequent sections we will look at issues involved in preparing both the visual and textual aspects of web materials. We also pay special attention to preparing audio files, since in many aspects of linguistics audio is crucial. Then we present two case studies of preparing material for specific courses: History of the English Language, where written texts of older forms of language are vital; and Varieties of English, where the contemporary sound of each variety is important. Finally, we attempt to summarize what we have learned so far in order to aid others as they incorporate Internet technologies in their linguistics courses.

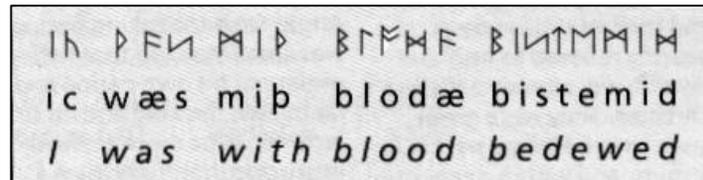
Working with Visuals

We will not discuss general website design here but instead look at the kinds of visual materials one might find useful for teaching about linguistics and also the problems one

might encounter. Many teachers think that teaching involves text only, but this is not the case. First of all, an occasional visual, even if unrelated to the lesson, is appealing. Consider separating major sections by a line or adding a small image of an animal/object on the corner of a handout. Students may then appreciate that the teacher has a sense of humor.



Other visuals do fit in with a lesson. In a language lesson on pollution, one could add a clip art rendering of a factory with a smokestack belching smoke. In a linguistics class, a tree structure of a sentence, if drawn by hand on paper, could be scanned and then included in actual teaching or on the web. One can scan maps or photos of scraps of ancient writing from books, or make various sorts of tables of linguistic material. By preparing such materials ahead of time, teachers save precious class time as there is no need to pass around heavy books or spend time writing on the board.



An Illustration of Runic Writing.

Working with Text

When we consider working with text, we have a number of issues to consider. The first is how students will view the text—in class on a big screen or from the web on their own computers. If we are using the material to lecture, then the text has to be large enough for students sitting at the back of the room to read without extra effort. Power Point recommends a default font size that is adequate. Don't try to put too much information on one page. The purpose of Power Point is to give you the teacher the outline to remind you what to speak about. Use phrases, not complete sentences, and include examples.

Power Point also recommends the Arial font by default. Arial is sans serif, meaning “without feet”; while the Times New Roman used here is serif, meaning it has the little feet on the letters and some other extensions on the letters for style. Compare **Arial** and **Times Roman** and you can see the difference. It is a printer's rule of thumb that serif is easier on the eyes for lots of text, such as newspaper articles, whereas sans serif is good for attention getting, such as in titles and ads.

Our main purpose is using Power Point is to give the audience the most important points to remember; it functions like titles or ads in newspapers or magazines. Therefore, a sans serif font such as Arial feels comfortable for the eyes. And normally we don't want to read a lot of text on a big screen, although a teacher of linguistics may occasionally want to put a text up on screen for analysis. In this case, the text should be in serif, such as the usual Times New Roman we use.

For the web, we can of course upload our Power Point lectures for student review. However, for other materials that are more text intensive, serif should be used, and Power Point is not the best choice. We can simply use Word, although some students have complained of some downloading problems. To save students from this excuse, save the files in PDF as the Acrobat Reader is free to download, so students have no excuse for not being able to read pdf files. Or we can make a web page by saving in HTML. HTML is more flexible if you want to provide embedded files.

Color is another consideration. Power Point can be presented as plain black on white, but the program usually includes some other decorative formats. Don't get too carried away

with the decoration as it could be distracting. Aim for something between black and white and fancy, pleasant but not distracting. Use either a dark background with light text, or a light background with dark text. Remember the student at the back of the room and the time he has to look at the screen. Be kind to his eyes.

A particular problem linguists have is working with linguistic symbols, which in a computer reside in fonts. Many of us have had the experience of seeing a beautifully created file full of phonetic symbols turn into nonsense webdings when opened on another computer, a real disaster if that computer happens to be in your classroom or a conference room where you are giving a presentation. You may have fonts installed on your computer that have not been installed on the other computer. These problems could also occur if you are running different versions of Windows or Office or are moving between Chinese and English operating systems. Thus even though we can now use multiple fonts, alphabets, and writing systems on one computer, the OS has certain defaults depending on which is its home and hence probably most used language.

For example, whether you use an English or Chinese OS to type in English, all 26 letters of the alphabet will be in the same place and so will the numbers. But back in WIN98 apostrophes typed on an English OS came out only as a space on a Chinese OS set for typing in English. Similarly, a comma might come out as the letter “m”. While XP has straightened out a lot of these problems, there are still inconsistencies with the less frequently used symbols. Even with XP, I’ve had my lovely vowel chart made on an English OS turn into crosses, scissors, and glasses when opened on a computer in the language lab using a Chinese OS.

Similar problems occur on the Internet. We’ve all had occasional e-mails in strange symbols, and if we decide it’s not spam and want to read it, we click on View Encoding and change the encoding until we can read it. The same can be done for web pages, although the newest software does this automatically with a high level of success. However, if we upload Word or Power Point files, the reader may also find that linguistic symbols have somehow converted to nonsense soup, and the student viewer may not realize that he needs to play with the encoding. We teachers should make certain the student views what we intended.

So how can we avoid these problems? The safest way is not to depend on someone else’s computer to interpret your linguistic symbols; we can save the symbols instead in a format that keeps them intact. For charts and tables, we can save them as picture files (tiff for black and white, jpg for color). If these have been scanned first, they may not be as clear as type, but one can experiment. For whole pages or pages interspersed with symbols, we can save as pdf. This will ensure that your page is viewed exactly as you meant it to be viewed. One consideration with pdf is that if you already have links on a file, those links will disappear in the process of turning the file into pdf format. The words or symbols or URL indicating the link will remain, but when you click on it, there is no active link. You will have to reinsert the link, and this is possible.

[f], [v]	labio-dental
[θ], [ð]	interdental
[s], [z]	alveolar
[ʃ], [ʒ]	palatal or palato-alveolar
[h]	glottal

Figure 1. Phonetic Symbols Inserted into a Table and Saved as a Picture File

Working with Sound Files

Working with sound files is slightly more complex than working with text files, but if you already know how to download music from the Internet, you can learn to make and upload sound files. Sources of sound files include the internet (in this case, just link to the URL) and analog and digital files you already have or can record.

In linguistics we are most often interested in some data from informants, which we may have recorded ourselves or collected from the media. If you collected your data recently, it may have been done with a digital voice recorder and so you can easily input it to your computer. Such recorders come with software to upload to your computer and save in various formats.

Recordings made in earlier times may have been archived on analog audiotape. Computers produced within the past several years all have sound cards, so it is a fairly simple matter to digitize your audiotapes. Start with a tape player with reasonably good playback quality; it should have a headphone jack. You will need to connect a wire from the tape player's HEADPHONE jack to the computer's LINE IN or MICROPHONE jack. You can purchase such a wire cheaply at any computer or electrical shop.

When you have the wire connected, presuming you are using Windows, go to PROGRAMS, ACCESSORIES, ENTERTAINMENT, and there should now be a choice called SOUND RECORDER. Hit RECORD on the Sound Recorder and PLAY on your tape player. Do a 10-second test and then see if you can play back your recording by hitting PLAY (make sure your speakers are on). If you hear nothing at this point, then you will need to check your VOLUME CONTROLS. Often you may find the Windows default is ON for speakers but OFF for all other devices. You will need to open Volume Controls, either by right-clicking the volume control icon in our task bar or opening the Control panel to SOUNDS and AUDIO DEVICES, VOLUME, ADVANCED. You should see a whole row of volume controls, including LINE IN and MICROPHONE. If these are marked MUTE, then deselect mute and adjust the volume to about 2/3. You may also have to readjust the volume later, but note that you can also adjust the play volume on your tape player.

If there is still problem, your computer may have two microphone jacks and the activated one is not the one you are using. Under the Microphone Volume Settings click ADVANCED, and you should be able to activate the other one. Or you could change your wire to the other microphone jack or try Line In if you have it. Note that if you decide to record data directly from an informant into your computer via a microphone, the situation will be the same.

Once you can record and the volume is acceptable, you are ready to record. Remember to SAVE. Now you may want to edit into smaller segments. I do not use the Windows Recorder but Cool Edit Pro because I also create music files and I find the software gives me more recording and editing options. It also lets me save files in more formats, including MP3. The Windows default is WAV; this is high quality and good for making music CDs, but the files are too large for uploading to the Internet. MP3 files are much smaller. Right now you can estimate that each minute of a sound file takes about one megabyte (1MB) of space. So for uploading to the internet, right now MP3 is the preferred file format.

Working with Video Files

Working with video is the most complex, but if you already edit your home movies on your computer, you have mastered the most difficult part. There are a number of things we can do with video files. For example, we might show a video clip on VHS in class but present it to students for review in audio format only. Videos we might want to use to supple-

ment our linguistics classes might be copyrighted, so we might want to be careful about putting them on any Internet site. We might more easily get away with uploading an audio excerpt. But the most important reason is that video takes up a lot of megabytes (up to 10 per minute of video depending on rate of compression), and our websites or e-learn systems may not have the capacity.

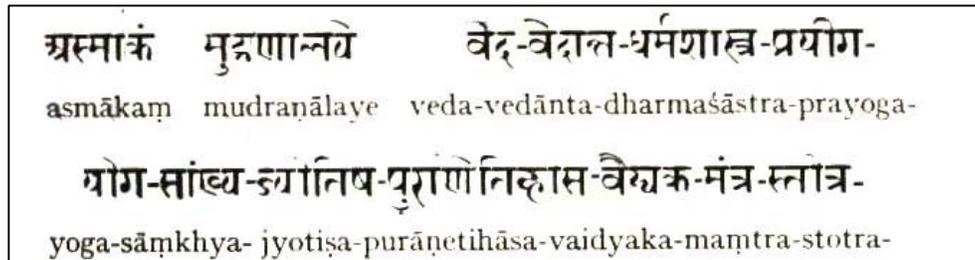
In addition to the audio file, we could add text, especially for EFL learning. But audio and text is still a bit boring, so we could insert appropriate still images from the video to make the file more colorful and also to remind students of the content. How can we do that? It is easy if the video file is already on DVD or some other digital format. On most new computers produced in Taiwan with DVD drives, Power DVD is installed. On it is a function CAPTURE. One simply hits PAUSE on the DVD image one wants, then hits CAPTURE and the image is saved. One can set the file in which to save, but the default is PROGRAM FILES then CYBERLINK, POWER DVD, and IMAGES (on Windows XP you may find the default is MY DOCUMENTS, MY PICTURES). Stills are saved numerically. We can simply paste them in any Word or Power Point or HTML file; each of those programs has a picture editor to change the size, crop, add brightness, and make other modifications.

Case 1: History of the English Language

At National Tsing Hua University, History of the English Language 英語語言史 is offered every third semester. It is a three-credit elective course that fulfills a requirement for English majors. Those who wish to concentrate in linguistics must take four from a list of six courses, and History of the English Language is one of these courses¹. We use an old standard textbook, Baugh and Cable *A history of the English language*, now in its 5th edition, with some homework exercises taken from the accompanying workbook and others from Algeo's *Problems in the origins and development of the English language* (1966).

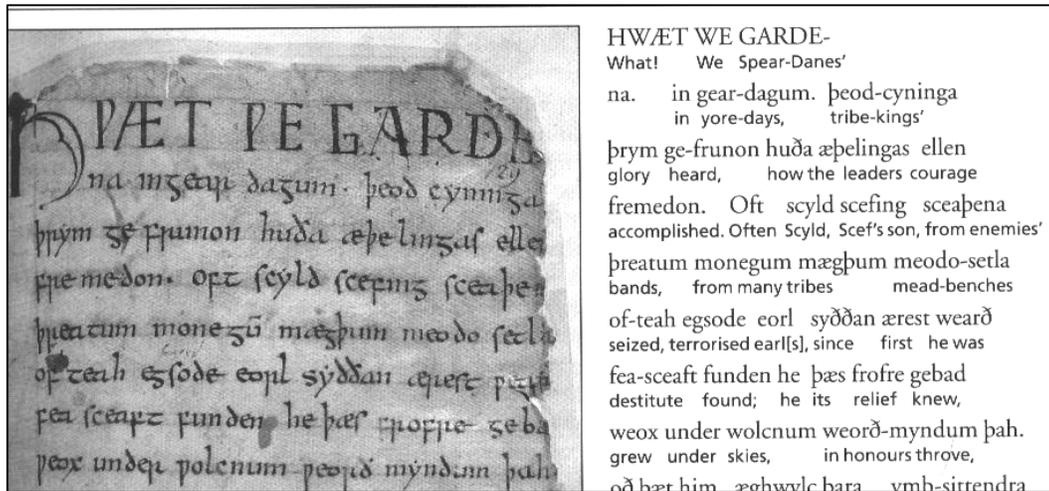
In the first part of the course we cover some general information about the Indo-European languages (Chapter 2, Baugh & Cable), the family to which English belongs, paying special attention to its nearest relatives in the Germanic languages. We look at the history of Britain, the Celts, the coming of the Romans and their influence, and then the coming of the Germanic tribes and later the Danes. Then we shift to the actual form of Old English, the grammar and sound system (Chapter 3). After this we have the first exam.

In the second part we follow the textbook with Chapter 4 (linguistic influence of the Celts, Romans, and Danes on Old English), Chapter 5 (the Norman Conquest), and Chapter 6 (the re-establishment of English) and have the second exam. In the final portion we look at the linguistic features of Middle English (Chapter 7) and usually run out of course time about the time of Shakespeare or just beyond (Chapters 8 and 9).

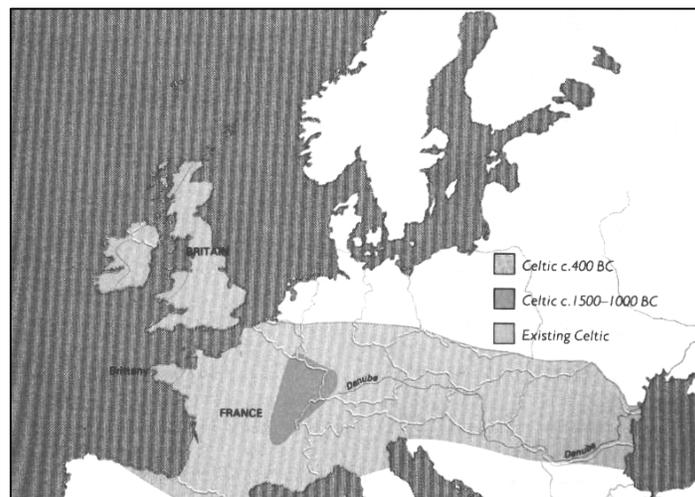


Sanskrit excerpt scanned from a book

This course is about language that is only recorded in written form. Thus a scanner is a necessary piece of equipment for showing students copies of excerpts of texts in ancient languages. Students can see how Hittite was written, or Sanskrit. In the past I took books containing excerpts to class and passed them around; now I scan relevant excerpts and we can all look at the same material on the big screen. Or we can examine small segments of texts for some linguistic details, again with my guidance on the big screen. At other times we may want to scan maps or even images from the time period to supplement our lecture notes.



Beginning of Beowulf, scanned from Crystal, 1995.



The Extent of Celtic (from The Story of English)

Another use for a scanner is for exercise pages. I would like my students to use materials from two different workbooks, yet we do not use enough to warrant buying the books. I initially save the scanned file in jpg, a picture file, for two reasons. First, older forms of English use other letters and these will cause difficulty when scanned as text. Second, a jpg file can be edited with photo editing software, and this is useful when scanning from older books with yellowed pages as you can add brightness to make them easier to read. Or if you are working from old worksheets on which you have written notes, the picture editor provides tools to remove smudges and other marks. In the past we did this with the copy machine and white-out. After the jpg file is cleaned up, I save in pdf; pages can be added easily to produce

multi-page pdf files. Uploading homework exercises provides a big benefit to your department—you don't have to make so many copies. Now the student prints his own homework exercises and we are relieved of a troublesome task.

Because of the nature of the material, there are no sound recordings from ancient times. Nevertheless, I do use a few recordings of what Old English and Middle English purportedly sounded like. There are also materials available to illustrate the sounds of the language at these stages. These can be saved in MP3 and uploaded to accompany the text.

Concerning video, Part 2 "The Mother Tongue" in *The Story of English* is a good supplement and review of material from this course. It moves from the Celts to the Middle Ages in 55 minutes, so I use it in smaller segments to match what I am teaching. I found that the first two episodes of the BBC's 2004 *A History of Britain* also go from early Celtic times to the Norman Conquest and can be used as a supplement in small doses. As mentioned previously, video takes a lot of space, so uploading is only feasible in small segments, under 5 minutes. Here it might be more efficient to present the sound file only with accompanying text and perhaps some selected still shots from the video because students have already seen the video once in class. The Example below is from *The Story of English*, Tape 2, and we have a still of Page performing the opening lines of *Beowulf*.

The Anglo-Saxons were an agricultural people and mostly illiterate. But they had an ear for the music of the spoken word, and they loved to recite poetry in the mead halls after feasting. Christopher Page believes that an Old English vernacular masterpiece like *Beowulf* might have sounded something like this.



Case 2: Varieties of English

Varieties of English 英語方言 is an elective course that fulfills an undergraduate linguistics course requirement. While I would like to offer it every third semester, due to other teaching duties, often I have to postpone offering the elective to the fourth, fifth, or even sixth semester. I teach it as a linguistics course and test students on their knowledge of the linguistic factors, but my real purpose is to provide students with tools for comprehending various forms of English that they may meet in the real world. That is, while we do look at differences in vocabulary and grammar, we focus most on pronunciation and intonation as these tend to be the major features that inhibit comprehension. We always meet new vocabulary as we travel from place to place, even within our own variety of language, and we can ask what an unknown word means. Grammar does not differ much between varieties unless we are looking at some more extreme examples far from the standard variety. But is it pronunciation and related intonation that can obscure communication completely until one learns how to "tune in". Therefore, I try to help our students to "tune in" with lots of examples for listening along with explanations of where the differences lie.

Unlike History of the English Language, where spoken linguistic examples are few and reconstructed, in Varieties of English we are for the most part looking at contemporary speech—from audiotape but mostly from videotape. We find speakers of all sorts of varieties of English in our televisions each night. If there isn't a film or program from Australia, there may be some news story about Australia in which we hear some politicians or ordinary people speaking. We also include varieties from the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia, the Philippines, even Africa, and other places where English is one of the official languages, a second language with its own unique features.

Toward the end of the course I include some examples of English spoken as a foreign language. This may seem strange, but it is not when we think of what our students may be doing after they graduate. There is a saying attributed to the specialist in World Englishes Braj Kachru that 80% of nonnative speaker use of English is with other nonnative speakers. This means people from Taiwan interacting in English with Indonesians, Germans, and Brazilians for various business and other purposes. My purpose is to prepare students to stretch their ears, to be more open to variation by showing them the kinds of variation they might encounter. I have met a few former students who mentioned specifically that this course was very good preparation for the time they spent working abroad.

How do we use Internet technology for this course? In addition to the Power Point files and any relevant visuals, there is more of a focus on the sound files. I believe it is important in class to use video clips because it feels more interesting to see the person speaking, and comprehension is facilitated when we can see a talking head. We see the mouth pronouncing the particular sounds, and we can pause and watch/listen again. For student review, it is not necessary to upload video files because it is review, and video files take up a lot of space on a server. I present the transcript of that particular clip with the special linguistic features indicted. It is better to put the text on an HTML file as power Point is not made for presenting large blocks of text (even when presenting the material in class, we can make a link from a Power Point file to an HTML containing the text to put on the screen). Students can read the text and click on the MP3 files to listen at the same time. The technology allows them to repeat segments as often as they like in order to listen for that bright “i” or unaspirated “p”.

Indian English

- Syllable timed
- Purer vowels
- Non-rhotic
- Bright [i]
- Retroflex consonants
- th as [t] and [d]
- Exchange of [w] and [v]



- Special intonation pattern
- Special grammatical use (e.g., progressive terms, standard tag “is it?”; “only” as an intensifier)
- Special vocabulary
- Click [here](#) to listen to an example



**Two Slides Explaining the Features of Indian English
with a Link to the Sound File with Text**

INDIA (from *The Perfect Murder*, Merchant Ivory Productions) Listen to [India.mp3](#)

Where have you been all day? I'm telephoning and telephoning the whole day and they say you are out on duty. Duty all day, all night and then all day again. And here your child is sick, ill, dying, and the father doesn't care.

What? ()'s ill? Have you informed Dr. Bombala?

What use is Dr. Bombala? Doesn't a mother know better what to do than her doctor only?

Oh, I see. So you have been able to comfort him, huh? Is he sleeping now?

Yes, after two full hours of trying. When the father comes home, the sick child is sleeping. He does not care what agony the boy had to endure.

I did not know he had to endure any agony. They gave me two cases at once, both top priority. It's duty, I suppose.

Text and Sound File to Which the Previous File on Indian English Links

Above is an example of two Power point slides about the speech characteristics of Indian English linked to an HTML file containing the text of a sound file of an excerpt of Indian English and a link to click to hear the file while following along in the transcript.

Evaluating Student Performance

While I have taught the two courses mentioned previously many times over the past twenty years, now I am in the process of adapting them to an e-learning environment. History of the English Language is being offered in Fall Semester 2004 and Varieties of English in Spring Semester 2005. The previous time I taught each course (Fall 2002 and Spring 2001 respectively) I had begun to prepare Power Point slides to accompany my lectures, but I only began to use the Internet actively to provide linguistics course materials for review in Fall 2003, when I was teaching Introduction to English, a required course for first semester freshman English majors (details in Katchen, 2004).

For Introduction to English, I found it useful to post student quizzes but only with the following restrictions: a five-minute time limit to take each quiz and a limit of one time per student per quiz. Otherwise, some students took the quiz over and over and continually raise their score and experienced all the possible questions. Nevertheless, since students could print out their own quiz, groups of students got together and pooled their random questions. Thus different questions or similar questions worded differently had to be developed for the tests. Despite my restrictions, students still reported in a questionnaire that they liked having the quizzes as preparation for the tests.

While the scores on the ten quizzes made up 25% of students' grades, the other 75% came from in-class written tests. With a class of 68 students answering primarily multiple choice and matching type questions (freshmen may not be capable of writing reasonable essays in English), I saw no reasonable way to guarantee test security other than giving the tests in class with paper and pencil.

The main reason for providing quizzes for Introduction to English was to help prepare new freshmen, who may never have been taught a content subject in English before, for the tests. Older students do not need such careful guidance. Instead I will most likely, as in the past with handouts, provide study questions which will be somewhat similar to the essay questions they will get on the tests. History of the English Language has 53 registered students as of October 11, 2004. Despite the record high number, a combination of essay questions, linguistic problems, mixed with some matching and multiple choice questions, seems to be as appropriate now as in the past. I have not yet found an effective way to incorporate on-line testing in this course, and right now I foresee the same for Varieties of English.

Concluding Remarks

From Spring Semester 2002 to Spring Semester 2004, National Tsing Hua University was using for its e-learn system a Microsoft compatible (Internet Explorer 5.0 or higher) interactive learning platform developed under the unix operating system through Wisdom Master 2.4. Teachers could upload course materials, create different exam types (multiple choice, matching, etc.), track students' use of the pages, and collect their scores from on-line exams. Students can access course materials, assignments, and exams and check on their own progress (such as their scores from on-line tests). Students, teachers, and auditors could use the bulletin board and on-line chat. While the default navigation language was Mandarin Chinese, under Personal Tools one could switch the language to English.

At the time this paper was written, the university was in the process of changing to Blackboard, beginning in Fall Semester 2004. The biggest complaint of my students concerning the older e-learn system was that it was so unstable, secondly that it was difficult to navigate. As Blackboard has been used in the USA for a long time and also within the university systems in Taiwan, we hope it will also prove to be more user-friendly and stable for our students.

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