

The Annotation Functionality to Support Language Teaching and Learning

Shih-Hsien YANG^{a*}, Sheng-Shiang TSENG^b & Hui-Chin YEH^c

^a*Department of Applied Foreign Languages, National Formosa University, Taiwan*

^b*Department of Applied Foreign Languages, National Yunlin University of Science and Technology, Taiwan*

^c*Graduate School of Applied Foreign Languages, National Yunlin University of Science and Technology, Taiwan*
shiyang@nfu.edu.tw

Abstract: This project intends to develop a supportive English website management system for both teachers and students to manage the available internet resources to make authentic learning more inviting and effective. The annotation functionality was designed to scaffold, support, and evaluate students' learning processes and outcomes. With the annotation functionality, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students can take initiative in their own learning with the virtual assistance. This website learning management system intends to make it possible to turn teachers as authoritative figures into virtual language learning facilitators through annotations.

Keywords: Annotation, the virtual facilitator, language learning, scaffolding

1. Introduction

Due to the rapid growth of technology, language learning websites are widely employed in different fields. Learners at all ages have increasingly access to many websites in English, which have the potential to provide seemingly limitless amount of authentic learning materials for EFL learners. In terms of language teaching, teachers have been seeking for different possibilities to assist students in their learning through the learning websites. English websites emerge to support English learning and teaching in the past few decades. It is evident that a wide variety of teaching websites are designed and developed based on various teaching principles ranging from behaviorism, cognitive theories to constructivism in order to assist students in improving their English proficiency. However, the rich resources on the internet did not provide all the answers to language learning and teaching unless there are enough scaffolding functions designed to support learning. Particularly, EFL learners from all different levels with limited language proficiency found it almost impossible to get access to the authentic language learning websites. The purposes of the study are to develop a supportive language website management system to assist both EFL teachers and students for teaching and learning.

It has been argued that it is effective for language learners to get access to the authentic materials for meaningful learning. With available resources online, it is imperative for the teachers to provide scaffolding to assist learners to obtain the adequate authentic website resources and to make full advantage of them. For EFL contexts, two compelling concerns were identified to meet the EFL learners' needs. First, how exactly can the EFL learners benefit from online learning through authentic English websites? How is it possible for EFL learners to get access to those learning websites so as to sustain

their ongoing learning? Through the annotations, a virtual instructor could possibly be expected to facilitate students' learning through the annotations functionality.

The design of this supportive language learning management system for web content management was grounded in the scaffolding theory. Scaffolding theory has been advocated to provide learners with assistance who could not accomplish a task beyond their current level on their own and such support can be gradually decreased while learners gain autonomy over their learning (Azevedo; Cromley; Thomas, Seibert & Tron, 2003). According to Jonassen (1994), in order to arm students with the ability to accomplish a complex and challenging task, it is imperative to provide learners with individualized scaffolding and support; otherwise, learning will be ineffective. With the scaffolding, learners can go beyond the zone of proximal development; that is, extend what they can do now toward the goal of accomplishing more difficult tasks with support (Dunlap & Grabinger, 1996). Furthermore, learning takes place and persists when students are motivated to learn by meeting their individual interests and needs. This compelling need for the individualized learning speaks to the ZPD principle, which stresses the importance of providing assistance to learners to reach their potential learning level.

2. The website management system

2.1 Annotations in dialogue boxes in a website management system

The system consists of the mechanisms, including the guiding annotations in dialogue boxes to provide students instruction, and assessment functions to evaluate to what extent the students have learnt. The annotation functionality could play the role of a virtual facilitator to scaffold, support, and evaluate students' learning outcomes. Students have multiple accesses to acquire a wide range of information presented in different forms, such as texts, graphics, or animations to foster their proficiency level and particularly enhance their language ability through the websites. However, not every language learner is able to improve his/her own language skills from the web-based learning environment. They indicated that for those beginners and lower achievers, owing to their limited language proficiency, they would be overwhelmed with too much information in the learning websites in non-linear fashion, and become less motivated to learn. In light of this, the annotations in dialogue boxes are developed for teachers to write the specific instruction on the website and provide specific and adaptive instruction to assist learners to learn how they can undertake the tasks step by step. The content of dialogue box can be filled out by teachers. Other learners can also write down instructions and add messages, information either in simple English or Chinese to facilitate other learners' comprehension in the website management system. The annotations in the dialogue boxes allow teachers to move around bubbles into the sessions that need more explanations and these individualized and adaptive functions make it possible for teachers to select the appropriate learning websites to accompany with teachers' explanations and written instructions. After the learners have undertaken the tasks, they can also write their own annotations for other learners to get access to the available websites for further learning. The collective effort in writing annotations creates different opportunities for learning.

2.2 Assessment

Through the language assessment, teachers can come into realize the effectiveness of teaching, appropriateness of the materials, and the effectiveness of the syllabus (Hardley, 2000). Furthermore, students can have multiple accesses to self-evaluate their own

learning so as to discover what needs to be improved to reach respective goals of learning (Sadler, 1989). The formative assessment can further lower students' affective filter and foster learning motivation, because the feedback of the formative assessment allows lower achievers to realize their own drawbacks to overcome the difficulty possibly stemming from their lack of innate ability through efforts (Ames, 1992). The language learning system with the annotation functionality intends to incorporate formative assessment and summative assessment to design the following test formats to evaluate what students have learned from the particular selected websites. In order to realize how much learners have learnt from the particular websites, two types of tests are adopted: journal writing and vocabulary test. To start with, according to Long & Richards (1987), journal writing is regarded as a type of language assessment in investigating what students have acquired by having students reflect upon their own learning. As a consequence, it is hoped that through the journal writing, learners can constantly examine their own learning by reflecting on what has learned, what is expected to learn, and what interests them.

Conclusion

Even though the available resources on the websites provide learners with opportunities to get access to multiple resources to foster language proficiency, there are still problems remaining unresolved for EFL learners to comprehend the English learning websites with their limited language proficiency. The problems mainly result from the fact that EFL learners often do not receive enough support in their learning process. To this end, a website management system provides the annotation functionality to scaffold language learning and teaching. The system aims to serve as a virtual language facilitator in helping learners to lower their affective anxiety and increase the accessibility for them to continuously learn at their own pace. The system mainly consists of annotations in dialogue boxes and assessment. The guiding instruction in dialogue boxes is designed to increase learners' understanding of how to access to English learning websites. The open-ended space intends to go with teachers' pedagogical needs and scaffolding instruction to prevent learners from overwhelmingly discharged from the targeted language learning. The assessment formats are designed to measure what students have learned for both summative and formative assessment.

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