# Enhancing Authentic English Learning to Non-English Speaking Learners Using a Course Homepage

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**Abstract**

The primary purpose of this work was to study the management of an instructional media through information technology network, the course homepage, in a general English course classroom. The study secondarily focused on problems occurred and the needs and attitudes of the users towards the course homepage. From a questionnaire survey, generally the findings were positive, especially concerning the extent to which the course homepage was used. There were, however, some problems, largely practical or technical, with using a course homepage.

**Introduction**

The availability of the Internet and the advance of technology offer a wide range of English learning possibilities in many non-English speaking countries. As a significant means of interactive communication, the Internet automatically becomes a part of life. Since the main information language (70%) on the Internet is English (Grey, 1999), the net surfers, therefore, are naturally exposed to it. In a language classroom context, the Internet has been an interactive instructional tool that provides motion pictures, sound and texts. The nature of this instructional tool usually requires language learners to respond by creating the same types of information. At the least, they perceive the content in English. Thus English learning is interesting and meaningful. In addition, the use of the Internet in the classroom accustoms the learners to using it for their pleasure. Surfing the net has dramatically increased in popularity as an out-of class activity among learners (Muehleisen, 1997). Foundation courses in English for beginners should take advantage of the technology to establish both language skills and a positive attitude towards the subjects. Basically, the courses are organized for a large amount of students. Electronic information and the technology center (homepage), where instructors pool their core courses' web pages, can be organized under professional supervision to enrich authentic English learning to non-English speaking learners. As a consequence, a useful learning resource center for learners and good rapport among teachers can be developed.

**Need**

Thailand is faced with "the Internet boom" era, when the Internet is becoming perhaps the most transformative technology in history (Chaikitphinyo: 2002), reshaping business, media, entertainment, and society in astonishing ways. But for all its power, it is just now being tapped to transform education. The most outstanding point of the Internet to educators is that it is bringing us closer than we ever thought possible to make learning - of all kinds, at all levels, any time, any place, any pace - a practical reality for every man, woman, and child. The Internet, as an EFL teaching tool, is gaining popularity in many Asian countries. In Thailand, Chaikitphinyo (2000) stated that because the Internet has been interpreted into many languages, teaching through the Internet has enabled teaching and learning in various forms (e.g. E-Book, Virtual Lab and Web Based Instruction). Furthermore, a study conducted by Watchawlaam,

Khurwan and Kanokpran (2001) showed that Khon Kaen University instructors' need for necessary matter, such as hardware/software/peopleware/management, for the production of instructional media through information technology network was at the "highest" level. Moreover, concerning the instructors' need for the utilization of instructional media through technology network, it was found that the course homepage or web-based instruction was needed at the "highest level". Therefore, this article aims to study the management, effectiveness, and aptitude of learners towards the use of a course homepage in education, especially in foreign language learning.

**The prospective course homepage**
To construct the course homepage, a survey was conducted to determine the general needs of the prospective homepage. This is a list of points to be considered when designing a web site.

From the learners' point of view, a good web site is one that:
- runs parallel to the in-class activities and exercises
- is usable
- offers a wide range out-of-class practice
- is worthwhile to visit
- is simply accessible any time and anywhere
- is regularly updated
- isn't irritating.

From the survey above and the availability of Internet resources and personal resource, a course homepage was outlined according to the following criteria:

*The course outline*: to create a site that fills a need, a site that requires little extra effort, and something that non-English speakers, from different English backgrounds, may find interesting. The target course is General English for Health Sciences, a first year English course for students in the following faculties: Medicine, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Dentistry, Associated Medical Sciences, Veterinary Medicine, Nursing and Public Health. The course aims to help students to be able to use English to communicate in various social situations and to participate in an academic context.

*In-class activities*: to develop web-based activities which run parallel to the in-class activities. The homepage offers opportunities for learners to repeat, practice and make up things they miss in class.

*Exercises*: due to the limitations of in-class time (3 periods per week), learners lack time to practice the in-class exercises. The course homepage is a place that is accessible all the time. In case the institution can afford only a limited space for each course, links to other related pages are helpful. All web pages are tried out out on different browsers and other computer platforms to make sure they will work for everyone, everywhere. They are made to be uncluttered, easy to navigate and easy to read. Colour changes and font size changes are made to avoid fuzziness.

**Constructing the course homepage**
The instructors and course homepage constructors worked with technical staff to construct the course homepage. The ideas were mainly derived from the former.

Having surveyed the educational network, the simplest style was given to the builder, and the most useful format for the users was outlined.

**Composition**

*Welcome page*: this is the index page that learners visit before continuing to other pages. The page consists of the course outline, course objectives, and background of the course. The content section is attached to every page.

*Material page*: this page provides names and details of the textbook, supplementary materials, and other language learning resources (e.g. Self-Access Learning Centre), which students need to complete during the semester.

*Listening practice page*: this page provides the basic language and cultural skills necessary for fundamental survival tasks in both the personal and academic contexts. There is a strong focus on communication.

*Speaking practice page*: this page guides learners to an understanding of how English sounds are made and guides the practice of making these sounds to improve pronunciation.

*Reading practice page*: this page offers activities to develop vocabulary skills, text summarizing and paraphrasing skills.

*Writing practice page*: this page focuses on improving learners' writing. A lot of web-based activities focusing on basic writing and reading strategies aim to prepare learners to use pre-academic material. Learners should be able to expand their knowledge and basic language skills and continue to apply these skills to everyday situations on campus and in the community.

*Grammar practice page*: this page focuses on the basic grammatical forms and patterns in English. Learners will have many opportunities to practise applying what they have learned in both speaking and writing.

*Useful links page*: this page directs learners to communities, extra exercises, entertainment, etc.

*Staff page*: this page has photos, names and details of all the staff for the course. Learners are able to click on the e-mail address under the instructors' names to reach them.

*Webboard page*: this page is where comments are brought to the attention of the webmaster and staff.

*Examination guidelines page*: this page helps learners to better prepare themselves for quizzes, the midterm, and the final examination. As new comers to the university testing system, learners should be well-informed about the types and the language of tests. They can view old exams and try them out before the real tests.

*Contact page*: this page gives the name and address with the telephone number of the head coordinator of the course in case students have general questions or comments about the course.

**The course homepage management**
As a general English course, which requires learners to attend the class three times a week, two hours were in-class (in the form of lectures) while one was a self-learning period through the course homepage. Many advantages of the Internet allow learners to access the course homepage limitlessly, therefore the instructor and the course homepage constructor worked hard, both before and during the semester. To use the course homepage, the teacher turned on her control desktop to check student participation. The teacher used her planning period to review student assessment data and plan classroom activities. After school, students went home and logged in to their class page to finish homework and submit assignments to their teachers. At night, teachers logged in to develop and update the homepage, to view comments and to collaborate with teachers around the world.

**Methodology**
The participants were 130 Khon Kaen University students who were taking General English for Health Sciences I during the academic year 2002. Data about the effectiveness of the course homepage were collected using a 30-item questionnaire composed of three parts: personal data of the participant, 5-level rating scale questions and an open-ended question (see Appendix). The mean ratings for the rating scale questions were calculated, and frequent and salient points made on the open-ended question were identified.

**Findings**
The main finding was that 87 percent of the participants "strongly agreed" that the course homepage was a useable teaching tool that ran parallel to the in-class activities and exercises. Therefore, almost 90 percent of them had positive feelings concerning the course homepage. A large number of participants claimed that it offers a wide range of out-of-class practice. The number of participants who visited the course homepage out-of-class "frequently" was at a "high" level. The need for using information and technology in an EFL classroom is at the "highest" level. Flexibility in teaching and learning through the course homepage was "high". Moreover, presentation through the web pages was preferred to oral report and paper assignments.

However, the need for the regular updating of the course homepage was at "high level". A few students found that net surfing was "difficult". Therefore, a high number of participants needed training in surfing the Internet. A large number of the participants commented that the course homepage should be more professionally designed. Most agreed that more graphics and motion pictures should be added to the website. Insufficient language consultants on the course homepage was a problem marked at the "highest" level. Difficulty and limitations in accessing the course homepage was dramatically high. While using the course homepage, technical problems were the most irritating problem to the users.

**Conclusions and discussion**
The Internet has been used to promote higher order thinking skills. It provides supplementary language activities, which can provide students with additional practice

in specific areas of language learning. The advantages and disadvantages of employing the Internet in the form of the course homepage will be discussed.

*Strong points of using the course homepage*
Despite some critical issues in using Internet technology as an instructing tool, the course homepage worked well with several advantages:

- Reduced costs in producing documents and supplementary materials.
- Huge economies could be made by delivering news, schedule and exercises to the learners through the homepage.
- There were gains in the students' exposure to English. Most students admitted that they logged onto the course homepage out-of-class.
- The technology tools enabled active learning. Learners were aroused to read and click to choose pages.

*Weak points of using the course homepage*
There are some limitations, disadvantages and obstacles in using the course homepage. First, standards are needed to ensure that the course homepage modules will be compatible with the textbook, in-class activities and course objectives. In addition, conversion of the files into electronic files should be carefully checked, organized and formatted to facilitate use. Files need to be developed for multi-media, human interactivity, record management, compatibility, accessibility, reusability, and digital rights management. The web page style should be clean and simple with visual contrast. Animation is unnecessary. The complementary colour scheme, group photos and logos and styles should come together to create a unified whole.

Copyright issues have been a critical topic. Copyright laws allow for the author of a work to retain the right to copy or distribute texts on the net. However, wholesale copying without giving credit to the author is not encouraged. Generally, it does not seem to violate the copyright law, as long as the teachers do not distribute the copied work under their own names.

Evaluation for a web-based course is subjective in nature. While no one is clear whether a theory on web-based course evaluation exists, it is clear that there are several main factors in need of consideration.

Although managing a course homepage is a significant task, requiring a considerable level of skill and expertise, it is worthwhile for students, teachers and institutions. For students, it is a learning portal to connect them to world of knowledge. Students can learn online, register for scheduled classroom sessions, or collaborate with peers or experts using the target language. Instructors can eliminate time in producing exercises and can also bring authentic English use to the class. Furthermore, the institution can reduce costs in producing documents and supplementary materials

**References**
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**Appendix Questionnaire regarding use of the course homepage**

Sex: _____
Age: _____
Section: _____

Please tick the column that reflects your view concerning each of the statements.

| | Strongly agree | Agree somewhat | No opinion | Disagree somewhat | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The course homepage ran parallel to the in-class activities and exercises | | | | | |
| 2. I enjoyed exploring the course homepage. | | | | | |
| 3. The course homepage offered a wide range of out-of-class practice | | | | | |
| 4. The course homepage was usable and worthwhile to visit. | | | | | |
| 5. The course homepage helped review the in-class activities. | | | | | |
| 6. In-class activities were enough to make me proficient in English. | | | | | |
| 7. It was a waste of time to explore the course homepage without the teacher or the language consultant. | | | | | |
| 8. The course homepage was accessible any time and anywhere | | | | | |
| 9. I want the course homepage to be updated more often. | | | | | |
| 10. I didn't have time to access the course homepage out-of-class. | | | | | |
| 11. Net surfing was "difficult". | | | | | |
| 12. I clicked to contact the teacher from the Staff Page. | | | | | |
| 13. Accessing the course homepage was difficult. | | | | | |
| 14. The language used in the course homepage was hard to understand. | | | | | |
| 15. The course homepage needed professional designing. | | | | | |
| 16. I felt more confident using the course homepage under the teacher's or the language consultant's supervision. | | | | | |
| 17. I would like to study in the normal classroom (using in-class activities) more. | | | | | |
| 18. Graphics and motion pictures should be added to the website. | | | | | |
| 19. Language consultants on the course homepage were required. | | | | | |

| | Strongly agree | Agree somewhat | No opinion | Disagree somewhat | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20. Technical problems always occurred while using the course homepage. | | | | | |
| 21. I would like to have studied in the normal classroom more | | | | | |
| 22. I visited the course homepage during out-of-class time. | | | | | |
| 23. The course homepage helped improve my English skills. | | | | | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 24. When I had questions about the contents of the course homepage, I asked the teacher in the classroom. | | | | | |
| 25. Using the Internet in learning English is reliable. | | | | | |
| 26. I felt free and motivated to explore the course homepage. | | | | | |
| 27. I needed training in surfing the Internet. | | | | | |
| 28. Information on the net was reliable. | | | | | |
| 29. I prefer reading and doing exercises from a book to on the net. | | | | | |
| 30. I would like to study in the computer lab more. | | | | | |

## General Comments

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Thank You

*Miss Dararat Khampusaen was born in Sakon Nakhon, Thailand. She obtained a Bachelor's degree in English, majoring in English and minoring in Linguistics from Srinakharinwirot University. Later she enrolled in Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language program in Mahasarakham University. At present, she is a lecturer of the Foreign Language Department, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University. Her main interest is using multimedia in teaching English.*