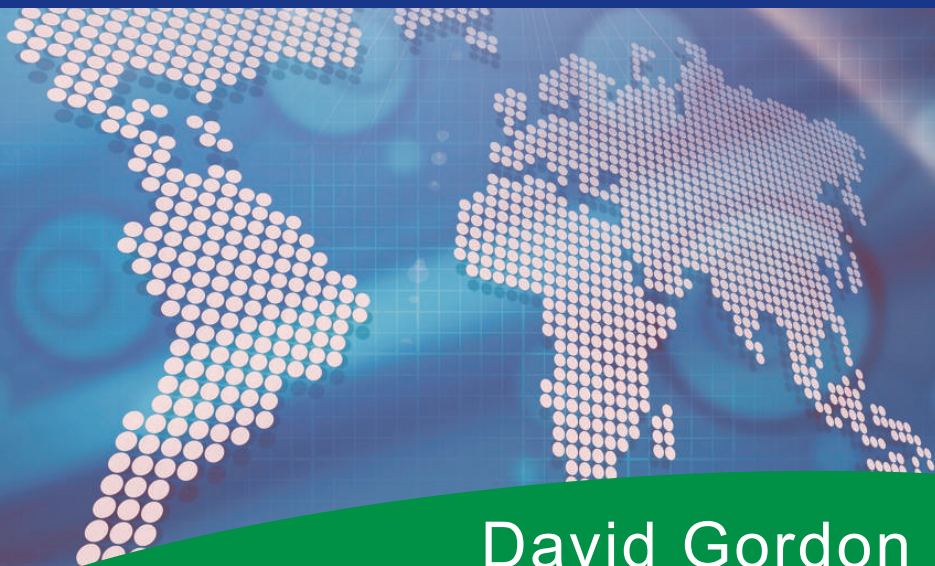


# Teaching English with Information Technology

How to use the internet and IT when teaching -  
for the professional English language teacher



David Gordon Smith  
and Eric Baber

Packed with practical advice, teaching tips and lesson ideas

# **TEACHING ENGLISH WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

David Gordon Smith and Eric Baber



Modern English Publishing

## **Teaching English With Information Technology**

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# Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	7
1 Using Email	15
2 Using Websites for Language Teaching	21
3 WebQuests	40
4 CD-ROMs	49
5 Text-chat, Internet Relay Chat and Instant Messaging	58
6 Using Internet Audio/video-conferencing	70
7 Learning Management Systems	81
8 Creating Your Own Website	89
9 Authoring Software: Creating Interactive Exercises	112
10 Using Standalone Software	121
11 Blogs	140
<i>Appendices</i>	
1 Website Addresses	144
2 Language-learning CD-roms	152
3 Books	155
4 Keyboard Shortcuts	156
<i>Glossary</i>	158
<i>Index</i>	176

# Chapter 1

## Using Email

Email is one of the simplest tools available to the language teacher interested in e-learning. Most people already use email as part of their daily life and have email software installed on their computers. Email is usable with just about any computer and there are seldom any problems with the technology.

If you don't already have email, the easiest way to get an email account is by opening a free web-based email account with a website such as [Hotmail](#) or [Yahoo](#). With this approach, you go to a website and log on with a user name and password (which you create the first time you visit the website). You can then check to see if you have received any emails since you last logged on, and you can compose new emails to send to other people.

The main disadvantage of such web-based email accounts is that you generally need to be online to write emails, which could be expensive for those of us who like to write lengthy emails or simply need more time to think. One way round this is to write your text in a word processor while offline, then copy and paste it into the appropriate window on the website after going online and logging into your email account. Having said that, you can now use Hotmail addresses offline using Microsoft's free email software [Outlook Express](#), so there are other ways around spending ages online.

So how can you use email with your students? Let's look at a few of the many possibilities.

## Homework and feedback by email

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Probably the simplest way to incorporate email into your teaching is to set your students homework via email. This homework can then be corrected in class, or alternatively students could return their work via email, with you then sending them feedback also by email.

The homework could be in the form of a writing task, or exercises such as gap-fills or matching exercises. You could include the homework directly in the text of the email (probably the easiest option) or write it in Word or another word processor and send it as an attachment. If you're feeling adventurous, you could also send pictures, audio files, or even web pages as email attachments as part of the homework. Bear in mind, though, that many people get nervous about receiving email attachments, as they can contain viruses. Make sure you give your email a relevant subject line so that the recipient knows you mean no harm. Also check the size of your attachment (usually shown automatically by your email program). Anything over 100 kilobytes or so may irritate the recipient, due to the length of time needed to download it. Large attachments (one megabyte or over) are often simply rejected by the receiver's email account, particularly with web-based email accounts such as Hotmail, so it's best to avoid them.

## Student activities

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**Email story-writing:** Get your students to use email to work on exercises and tasks together. For example, you can ask them to write a story collaboratively: the first student writes the first line, then emails it on to the second student, who writes the second line and sends it to the next student, and so on. Such an activity does need to be planned beforehand (for example, you need to determine the order of the students, and make sure students will log in regularly to pass the exercise on) but with sufficient planning it can work very well.

**Information-gathering:** Set students a task (this can be a larger-scale project) for which they will need to gather various items of information, at least some of which will require them to email companies or other

institutions for relevant information. This might include gathering facts or figures, prices, terms and conditions and more. The students should have to process the information and produce some kind of output - this could be for example a PowerPoint presentation which they then email to you.

**Jigsaw activities and role-plays:** These can work similarly to activities you might use in the classroom, but probably more effectively, since students don't have any visual clues to help them. Email each student a different piece of information as well as a task which requires them to find out information from another class member. For example, two students might be potential buyers of a product, while three other students are suppliers. The buyers have to email the suppliers with questions regarding price, delivery time and so on. Negotiations might be allowed, increasing the flow of email activity. Many classroom activities can easily be transferred to email and can be even more productive via this medium.

## **Proofreading students' documents**

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Many students need to write texts in English, whether business emails, academic papers or newspaper articles. Get students to send you texts by email for you to proofread and return. If you're feeling entrepreneurial you could even charge for the service – why not advertise your services on your website?

## **Keeping students informed**

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You can use emails to keep students informed on a wide range of issues such as: English-language films on TV or in the cinema you'd recommend; relevant news items in a newspaper or on a news website. In the latter case, you can send them the website address and ask them to read it before the next lesson, in which case you can base the lesson on the article; a play in English that is on at the moment in your area; other events in your area that your students might find of interest and which will take place before you see them again.

# *Chapter 2*

## Using Websites for Language Teaching

Most people have some experience with visiting websites, and the World Wide Web constitutes an incredible resource to use with your students. In many cases you can adapt online materials for use with activities and exercise-types you've been using for years. However, the medium also lends itself to new and different activities. Before we look at specific examples of tasks you can set your students, though, let's take a look at some strategies for sifting through the overwhelming amount of material on the web.

### **Using a search engine**

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The secret to finding good resources on the web is being able to use a search engine effectively. A list of recommended search engines can be found in Appendix 1. At the time of writing, the best search engine is commonly considered to be Google, although competitors such as AllTheWeb are gaining ground.

To use a search engine, you simply enter one or more keywords or 'search terms' into a box on the web page, then click on a button marked 'search' or similar. (In this book, example search terms to type in are in `Courier` font.)



For example, if you wanted to find information on Australia, you might start by simply entering the word *Australia* into the box then clicking on search.

Generally when using a search engine, the more keywords you enter, the better your results will be – they will certainly be more refined. With some search engines, you can specify if you want to find pages which contain all the keywords or only some, by using the operators ‘and’ and ‘or’.

For example, if you want to find pages which contain both the words ‘vocabulary’ and ‘grammar’, you would type the following into the search window:

*vocabulary AND grammar*

If you wanted to find pages, which contained either one of the terms or both terms, you would enter the following:

*vocabulary OR grammar*

It’s often useful to search for a specific phrase rather than individual keywords. To do this, you normally put the phrase into quotation marks. For example, if you wanted to find a page with grammar exercises, doing a search for

*'grammar exercises'*

would probably give you better results than searching for

*grammar AND exercises*

Normally you can also exclude words from your search by putting a minus sign ( - ) before the word. This can be very useful if one of your search terms has more than one meaning. Let’s say you want to find information on the Buddhist concept of nirvana. If you simply do a search for the word ‘nirvana’ you will likely turn up many pages on the rock band Nirvana, as well as on Buddhism. You can dramatically improve your results simply by excluding (for example) the words ‘rock’ and ‘music’ from your search, i.e. by entering the following as your search terms:

*nirvana -rock -music*

Probably the best results will be obtained by searching for the following terms:

*nirvana AND Buddhism - rock - music*

Be aware that every search engine differs slightly in the way it treats search terms. For example, Google automatically searches for pages which contain all your keywords, so there is no point trying to use the AND and OR operators with it. Search engines generally have a page of tips which help you search more efficiently; these tips are normally worth reading. Look for a link called 'search tips' or similar on the search engine home page.

## **Copyright on the internet**

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All the material available on the web is copyright. Using copyrighted material in your classes will probably not cause you any problems, but be aware that you should not publish your exercises in any form (including on your own website) without having obtained permission from the copyright holder. Website owners do not have to declare that their materials are copyright - they automatically are! Let's now go on to see what EFL/TESOL websites have to offer and what exercises and topics are available.

## **EFL/TESOL websites, and forums**

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Probably the most obvious web-based resources for teaching are those websites devoted to teaching English. These tend to have been created either by language schools (in some cases the schools themselves are entirely online) or dedicated individuals. Some sites charge for access, most (at the time of writing) don't. The sites themselves often include interactive exercises, where students, for example, choose the correct multiple-choice answer and then check their answers by clicking on a button to receive instant feedback. Another popular tool is the discussion forum, where teachers or students can post messages which other people can read and reply to.

### **Jargon box**

In a discussion forum, a sequence comprising the original message plus all the replies and counter-replies is known as a 'thread'.

This all sounds wonderful in theory, but as so often on the internet, there are snags. Possibly the best, and simultaneously the worst, thing about the web is the fact that anyone is theoretically able to publish their work. This means that any teacher can produce their own language exercises, and the quality of the materials available reflects this fact. Some exercises could be considered methodologically unsound, and sometimes the language is simply incorrect.

Another problem (which applies to using computers for language teaching in general) is the fact that computers see things very much in black and white, whereas language on the other hand is notoriously fuzzy. This fundamental incompatibility means that it is very difficult to design exercises which will accept all possible answers for a particular question. (This is one reason why multiple-choice questions are so popular for online exercises.) The result of this is that the poor unsuspecting student may, for example, type in the sentence “Can I help you?” as an answer to a question and be told it is invalid, simply because the computer was programmed to accept only “May I help you?”

Discussion forums provide students and teachers with a chance to air their views, but often turn into soapboxes or even boxing rings. Be sure to warn your students about the negative reactions they might experience to their postings.

From a student’s point of view, probably the major drawback is that the language they produce on the forum is never corrected. To get around this problem, you might want to recommend your students that they contribute to a specific forum of your choice, which will enable you to correct their messages in class or by email.

## **Exercises and activities**

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In our opinion, where the web really comes into its own for the EFL teacher is as a resource for planning lessons. No other medium offers such an enormous range of material on every conceivable topic (and not a few inconceivable ones). And this material is already in electronic form, making it simplicity itself to copy and paste texts into a word processor, ready for being made into exercises.

# Chapter 9

## Authoring Software: Creating Interactive Exercises

You've seen other ELT websites with fantastic interactive exercises on them. You've learnt a bit of HTML and have done some basic websites. Now you want to do your own great interactive exercises. The bad news is, your HTML knowledge isn't enough – for interactive exercises you need to know other programming languages such as JavaScript. The good news is there are other ways of producing interactive exercises without having to learn a new programming language. The easiest option is to use an authoring software, namely a software which will help you create interactive exercises without the tears.

There are various options available to the aspiring exercise writer. For example, you can:

- Download software from the Internet (or buy it on CD), install it on your computer, and use it to create individual exercises or complete web pages. You can then publish these on your website, put them on the computer(s) at your school for your students, or use them in any other way you like.
- Visit a website which will create the exercise for you, which you then save to your hard drive. Again you can then upload exercises to your web

server and integrate them in with the rest of your site, or else use them only on your computers at school.

- Create your exercise on the website and also store it there, so students have to visit that particular website to do the exercise. Naturally you can link from your site (if you have one) directly to the exercise you've made on the other site, thereby making it easier for your students to find the exercises you've made.

We should also mention in passing that with this kind of software you can usually print out the exercises on paper, as well as creating HTML pages. This can be handy if, for example, all you want to do is create a crossword to use in class. Letting your authoring software figure out the crossword for you certainly beats trying to do it yourself!

There are dozens of authoring software programs available, many of which are freeware or shareware. You can easily find out about the latest authoring software by doing a search for, for example, 'authoring software', 'interactive exercises', 'worksheet generator' English in your favourite search engine. To give you an idea of what is possible, we will take a look at two popular authoring softwares, one which you install on your computer ([Hot Potatoes](#)) and one which you use via the web ([Quia](#)).

## **Hot Potatoes**

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Hot Potatoes is probably the most popular authoring software among language teachers (as well as teachers of a range of other subjects). It's been around for several years and has gone through several versions. It is produced by Half-Baked Software Inc (how these IT people love their puns).

You can download Hot Potatoes for free (provided you are intending to use it for non-profit purposes) from the [Hot Potatoes](#) home page. Once you've installed it you can use it to make your own exercises. At the time of writing there are six different kinds of exercises available:

1. Multiple choices quizzes;
2. Short answer quizzes;
3. Jumbled sentence quizzes;

4. Crossword puzzles;
5. Matching exercises;
6. Fill-in-the-blanks exercises.

Hot Potatoes provides you with a user-friendly interface which takes the hard work out of producing exercises. For example, to make a crossword exercise, you simply type in the list of words you want to include in your crossword, and the program makes a grid accommodating all those words. Then you assign a clue to each word, press the 'export to Web' button, and the program automatically produces a web page with your crossword. You can then send this HTML file to your students by email, transfer it to their machines by saving it on a floppy disk which you then give to them, or upload it to your website.

There are, as always, a couple of snags with Hot Potatoes, despite its many virtues. One is that, like any piece of software, it takes a while to learn how to use it properly, although the tutorial and help functions are very useful.

Another potential drawback is that you are limited in the ways you can customise the exercise (presumably to avoid overloading the novice user with choices). So for example with the jumbled sentence exercise, you can only have one sentence per exercise. Considering it will might take a student only ten seconds to un-jumble any particular sentence, the exercise will not last very long.

On a similar note, Hot Potatoes exercises generally look very 'Hot Potatoes' i.e. they are instantly recognisable as having been created with this software. This will probably not be a problem, unless you might want to sell your exercises (having first obtained the correct licence, of course) and don't want a potential customer to know that you have used Hot Potatoes to create the exercises. Having said that, if your HTML skills are somewhat more advanced, you can alter the look and feel of the pages generated by Hot Potatoes to match that of the rest of your website, or to adapt it to the website of your client (if you are selling the materials you have created to a customer).

The other fly in the ointment is compatibility with different browsers. Hot Potatoes, along with other puzzle-making packages, allows you to create snazzy drag and drop exercises using DHTML. We don't need to go into what exactly DHTML is – suffice to say that it can be used to make some

# Teaching English with Information Technology

How to teach English with the internet and information technology - for the professional English language teacher. This book provides a comprehensive overview of the problems, solutions and products available to teachers; from the internet, websites and email through to audio-visual conferencing, teaching software, learning management systems (LMS) and the latest trends in blogs.

Covering a wide range of technological topics, this book explains how to use the technology in your classes and with your students.

This book is packed with practical ideas for creating lesson activities: from WebQuests to email conversations and provides an ideal guide for any professional teacher who needs to keep up-to-date with the latest developments in information technology and how best to use them productively.

- Tried and tested ideas to use when creating lesson plans
- Clear, concise guides to the internet and information technology and how best to implement and use them in your teaching
- Practical advice on integrating technology into your lessons
- Guides to teaching using a wide variety of new technology, including the internet, web, email, internet chat, video conferencing and blogs
- Advice on using learning management systems
- Useful appendices of CD-ROMs, websites and software products
- Packed with practical examples for you to use

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