With Help of Technological Aids to Help Students Learn English Better
JOHNNY HOU
A Teacher at LoTung Senior High School   1986 ~
ILAN, TAIWAN

INTRODUCTION

It is a great honor and privilege for me to have been invited to address the International Association of School Librarians (IASL), as it meets in Asia and in this beautiful city of Hong Kong.   We know education reform in Asian countries is prosperous.   Of course, Taiwan is no exception.   In recent years, Taiwan has made a great profit in information science, especially in computer industry. What I really mean is in Taiwan, computers come into our daily life. So, even in primary or secondary schools campuses, it is not uncommon for school staffs or students to use computers. Being an English teacher in high school, I think maybe it is about time that we are supposed to modify our teaching approaches or improve our teaching effect by way of the use of computers. But how computers can be used in school?   School computers are being used in many different ways and to very different extents.   Computers can be used as:

Relaxing tool - Computers are used for games, talking, photo-reading and so on, especially in secondary education.   And I do believe a playful approach to computers helps students prepare for their study and stimulates their creativity and imagination.

Teaching tool – We teachers may use computers for administration tasks, production of documents, and the creation of lessons.   Especially for English-teaching, you can easily find so much information to add up your teaching materials or supplements via WWW.   This includes keeping of records, handling information, producing individual letters to learners or a class newsletter, making personalized certificates of achievement, collecting students' reports, posting their great assignments on the bulletin board or teaching websites after correcting, etc.

References tool – Students finish their assignments by using computers to search for the information they need. With access to information on the Internet, they can easily solve their problems, such as the utility of an online dictionary or something.   The Internet smoothes the way gathering data for class assignments, taking online exploring to travel reports and photos from various countries, reading some works written by other students, following up on current news and issues, taking virtual field trips to great websites such as museums on the Internet or something like that.

Communication tool – English emails help students to indicate their expressions in English directly and it is important for them to grasp the chance to practice their English.   In Asia, especially in Taiwan, English comprehension tests are common in schools but not in our daily life.   Typing English emails in computers classroom helps students get used to the familiarity of their English Comprehension and application. It is also all right for students to communicate in English with one another at home after school.

Training tool for repetitive tasks - This includes the use of drill and practice programs in the fields of pronunciation, reading, grammar, or simple tests. This also includes solving paragraph writing, studying irregular verbs, learning vocabulary, spelling, recalling historical dates, etc. The following is what I have done to guide my students to improve or exercise their English-learning skills by the use of computers.

TO INSTRUCT STUDENTS TO TYPE ASSIGNMENTS IN MICROSOFT OFFICE.

Several years ago, I tried to ask my students to type their assignments with WORD. Therefore, they could easily save their document and email one another, of course, including those typed on my own. Sometimes they also typed vocabulary with EXCEL, including speech, phrases, idioms, and ex. sentences. If there were important sentence patterns in the texts, I would also type them with POWERPOINT and showed them next time. We all knew it was good to brief our teaching materials with POWERPOINT. Sometimes if my students had not much time to note down the words I said, they would ask me to send them the file I told before. With the help of Microsoft Office, we knew it was convenient for students to check their spelling and basic grammar. Most of our students studied hard for learning English but they just read the texts and we gave them English quizzes to evaluate their comprehension and application. Mainly they needed to correct their mistakes, so they had to recite a lot of vocabulary, comprehended the contexts and analyzed grammars in order to get great grades. In fact, we knew students could collect and integrate their reference materials by way of the use of WORD, EXCEL, and POWERPOINT. Except for the manuscripts, the assignments typed by WORD are much better than those by hand. I do believe using computers can explain text in innovative ways, enrich or broaden the context of literary study, see texts in alternative versions, sort and process text and data quickly and efficiently, and arrange text and data experimentally.

TO INSTRUCT STUDENTS TO TYPE EMAIL EACH OTHER IN ENGLISH.

I heard [1] AJET project in Kaohsiung several years ago, and that gave me some inspirations. It is an acronym for **A**dvanced **J**oint **E**nglish **T**eaching, with technology in our hand as a flexible learning tool. It seems like **A**dvancing **J**oint **E**nglish **T**elecommunication, with collaborative effort of English and computing experts. The project proceeds like "A (student-centered) Jet", with all students as passengers and teachers as guides. Anyway, I knew students were introduced to the Internet and encouraged to develop an international perspective by communicating with students in other countries. They used the tools of email, BBS, chat, web pages (text, pictures, sound, and video) and the medium of video conference. Students were used to using many new media to present themselves. In Taiwan, in our daily life, we seldom have the chance to speak in English. Strictly speaking, English is just a main subject to master, and students study hard mainly for passing the J.U.E.E. (the Joint Universities Entrance Exams). English is everything but not a tool to know the world. In Taiwan, English seems not to be a real language for normal students to communicate with one another. That's the main problem, and that's why English-teaching is not so effective and practical in our society. But in the meanwhile, we use email at home in our daily life but it is still not easy in normal classroom. There are significant exams three times in a semester. Besides teachers, parents and students value the grades highly. We spent a lot of time preparing for English tests but seldom paid attention to keep in touch the world in English. I mean we learned English

but seldom used it as a tool to know the world or to broaden our sights.   In recent years, I have asked my pupils to email one another in English.   Earlier on, I surfed a website, called Englishtown.com, and I knew several English teachers from other countries.   It is really a great help for my teaching.   We exchanged the name list of our pupils and asked our students to email exotic friends.   I still remembered one of the classes came from Saint Petersburg, Russia, and another came from Warsaw, Poland.   It is amazing that students found it quite different from culture to culture during the exchange of emails.   But this year I just asked one of the classes to email their classmates and it was also interesting for them to exchange messages in English.   They occasionally chatted Chinese style English.   I still thought it was all right on account of they were joking or they just tried to find another way to express their ideas or thoughts.   As the saying goes,"learning by doing."   It also might be the limitation of their vocabulary or the incomprehension of English sentence structures.   Of course, it would never happen in our class, especially in English tests.   From their emails, I could easily find out the common mistakes in grammar and collocations.   Even so, I still encouraged them to go on emailing in English.   In the meanwhile, I would correct some mistakes by way of replying the mails.   Occasionally, they also found their mistakes by themselves.   As the proverb goes, "Practice makes perfect."

TO INSTRUCT STUDENTS TO SURF RELATED WEBSITES TO EXPAND THEIR KNOWLEDGE.

I encouraged my students to surf English websites, especially interesting and fun websites, such as PBS Kids, EnglishLearning.Com, Woodlands Junior School, Disneyland and Children's Storybooks Online, and so on.   There are also many great learning English websites, such as BBC World Service, World-English, English Online, and Using English.Com.   In Taiwan, most of the students surf the internet after school everyday.   But it turns into an issue pro and con.   I know computer games and MSN (Messenger) are attractive to them but I still find it quite helpful to surf related websites to expand their sights.   Besides the selected reading, students also read the related materials to comprehend better what they have learned for their textbooks.   And I also agree that some of the website materials, especially the more difficult part, need to be simplified or be made plainer.

TO INSTRUCT STUDENTS TO READ MAGAZINE WITH CD-ROM.

With the help of English-teaching magazines, we've got a large quantity of materials to prepare our teaching materials.   Actually, it is also good for English learners as outside reading materials. Within the instruction of the guides, students could comprehend English better by themselves. Most of the magazines are classified into several grades such as basic, intermediate, and advance. The English curriculum covers the four major aspects of skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing and they are almost included in these magazines.   Take CNN Interactive English Magazine for example.   There are several tracks for CNN news in brief, Quotations from the news, Music Video, Bizbeat, Confusing Words, and Listening Comprehension.   What I am most attracted is projected by images (CD-ROM).   It is projected just like DVD Theatres.   You could choose English and Chinese subtitles at the same time.   You also could erase either English or Chinese subtitles or you could cancel neither of them.   You even could choose the speed, slower or normal, anyway you like.

You could play one of the tracks continuously or pause it each sentence.   Its intermediate version, Live Interactive English Magazine, even has comic strips to stimulate students' motives.   I really think it is a good way to help students find a new way to have access to English in an easy way or a relaxing situation.   At least, students need not to prepare for tests while reading CD-ROM. Students like to play CD-ROM because they handle all the learning schedules, just as playing games. Some need to practice their pronunciation, some need to enhance their sentence structure and some might need to improve their reading comprehension.   They read the latest scientific information and watch the famous and popular hit movies of the month.   Most of the materials are interesting to students and they like to read it.   There are translations of each program and analyses of the sentence structures so students easily get the access to the materials.

TO INSTRUCT STUDENTS TO LISTEN TO MEDIA PLAYER OR REAL PLAYER

I often encourage my pupils to listen to cable news such as CNN, BBC or CBS.   But it is now more convenient to listen to the website news on the internet by websites, media player or real player.   I sometimes download one of the issues that I think is important for me or my students. I repeatedly listen to the news till I am familiar with it and then I email almost most of my students and ask them to listen to it by themselves.   Some of them found it interesting, and others found it difficult, and still others found it boring and lost their patience while listening to.

TO INSTRUCT STUDENTS TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER IN ENGLISH IN MESSENGER

Talking is one of the easiest ways to communicate with each other.   But if you are not familiar with a new language, it is quite embarrassing to talk in public or with strangers.   But I found out it is more embarrassing especially to have a speech with classmates in English.   Most of my colleagues have the same problem in our classroom.   In class, I usually try to translate the reading into Chinese for my pupils and analyze the sentence structures for them, and that's also what most of my colleagues do.   But after class, I also encouraged my pupils to chat in English online.   To prevent chatting with sex offenders or something like that.   I made a list of classmates and grant them their request to chat with themselves anonymities in English in class.   Sometimes they even like to chat me after school.   It is fun to chat in a second language to communicate with acquaintances.   I must admit it is not easy to prevent them from changing the object of the chatting.   Judging from the effect of the chatting lesson, they type fast but habitually think in Chinese but not English.   So their sentences are usually short and brief.   Occasionally they type Chinese style English.   It is similar to their email exercise.   So it is vital to practice how to train learners to think in a new language in their daily life.   And that could be the key to decide if they succeed to learn a new language.

TO PREPARE TEACHING-MATERIAL BY SURFING RELATED WEBSITES

In recent years, I have learned to make a habit of surfing internet to find out a lot of useful information related to my teaching materials.   There are twelve lessons in our textbook and we have to finish the text in a semester.   That is, I need to prepare for the reference materials or the supplements for my students almost a lesson per week.   Take one of my textbooks for example. One of the titles is Biosphere II.   When I type biosphere II in Google search engine, I could find 676,000 items related to this title.   Of course, what I need is just several of them.   But it is quite

convenient to find out the relative information you need.　Another example, if you type pics of biosphere, you could 2,110 related items.　So, you could easily find several useful pictures for your students and we know it is more truly to believe it if you see it through the pictures but not only by reading texts.　I especially like to surf traveling and literature websites.　Of course if it is great and suitable for my students, I will introduce some of my favorite websites to them.　Just as one of the coffee advertisements said,"Good things need to share with good friends."　From lesson preparing, I learned a lot and broadened my sights.　I knew a lot of great cities and areas and traveled there virtually.　I also knew many nobodies, erected their own websites, sharing their own experience and knowledge.　I am so appreciated all the anonymous for what they have done to the internet world. I also will continue to instruct my students to surf useful websites to learn English.　And it surely is a good way to be proficient in their English ability.

CONCLUSION

I am firmly convinced that using computers can help teachers in a number of different ways.　ICT can be used to integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing.　It enhances interactive teaching and learning styles.　It also extends pupils' ability to exercise choice, work independently and make connections between their work in English and in other subjects.　Someday people from all over the world will keep in touch more intense and rapider via computers, especially ICT.　I also know what I have done is just a little step, but actually it is also a big step for my teaching experience.　I do not doubt that the emergence of ICT and its widespread integration within schools around the world have had a deep and changeless influence on all aspects of education.　I also deeply believe that the more we practice using computers, the more we are proficient at English comprehension and expression.