Virtual Fun: You do not have to be a Techno-Geek!

Roseliz Francis and Anju Sahgal Gupta

Introduction

Beginning with CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) in the early 1990's to ICT (Information and Communication Technology) today, there are several media that facilitate the teaching-learning process today. According to Dudeney and Hockly (2012), '…mass access to the internet, the development of Web 2.0 tools and platforms, and the arrival of the social web and mobile technologies now enable teachers and learners to be globally connected and globally educated' (p. 533).In this technology driven environment, it is not enough for the student to merely read the text. In order to ensure the holistic development of the student, it is essential to go beyond the prescribed text.

There are certain pre-requisites required such as a mobile phone and a computer/laptop/ notebook with a good internet connection. Today's learners are avid users of mobile phones as well as other PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants). Developing activities using the media that they are familiar with is a good way to get them interested in the learning process. In this article, we have suggested how activities can be developed using ICT (Information and Communication Technology). Blogs, WebQuests, TEDTalks and Skype are some of the popular media that can be used to make learning an active and fun process. For this, the teacher needs to have a basic knowledge of computers such as use of Microsoft Office, and the ability to browse the internet.

Premise of the Study

Research has shown that learners do not compartmentalize knowledge into different subject areas, nor is language learning confined to the language class alone. In fact most of the language skills that develop are within other subject areas. It therefore becomes important to expose learners to language tasks which get their input from other disciplines. Moreover, we have to address a diverse learner population with their different learning strategies and multiple intelligences. ICT may provide some answers which may appeal to a learner population that has access to great facility in the use of technology. They are also comfortable communicating in a virtual world driven by various *apps* such as Skype and social media such as Facebook or Twitter. To help students engage with language and content, and become reflective learners sensitive to the environment around them, we need to use those tools that they are familiar with and are an essential part of their daily life.

As an example we have looked at a unit/lesson entitled 'Animal Rights' from one of the IGNOU courses (FEG 1, Block 1). This lesson has an extract from George Orwell's novel, *Animal Farm* in which Old Major, a white boar, gives an inspirational speech which causes the animals in Manor Farm to start a rebellion against the humans. This speech is primarily about how Man has exploited animals in various ways. Based on the extract are reading comprehension questions, as well as grammar, vocabulary and writing activities. In order to supplement the

activities provided in the lesson and to extend its scope to include a cross-curricular perspective, we have made use of ICT.

Hot Potatoes

The vocabulary section in the unit/lesson consists of two activities—'Picking out the odd word from a set of words' and 'Finding the appropriate word to fill in the blanks'. To extend vocabulary development, we decided to create a crossword puzzle based on 'Animal' idioms (Figure 1). This was created using Hot Potatoes, an open source software which teachers can use to create crosswords, cloze tests, match the following exercises and quizzes. Students can access this crossword at http://uk3.hotpotatoes. net/ex/103226/LITQSOZG.php and solve it online either in class or at home.
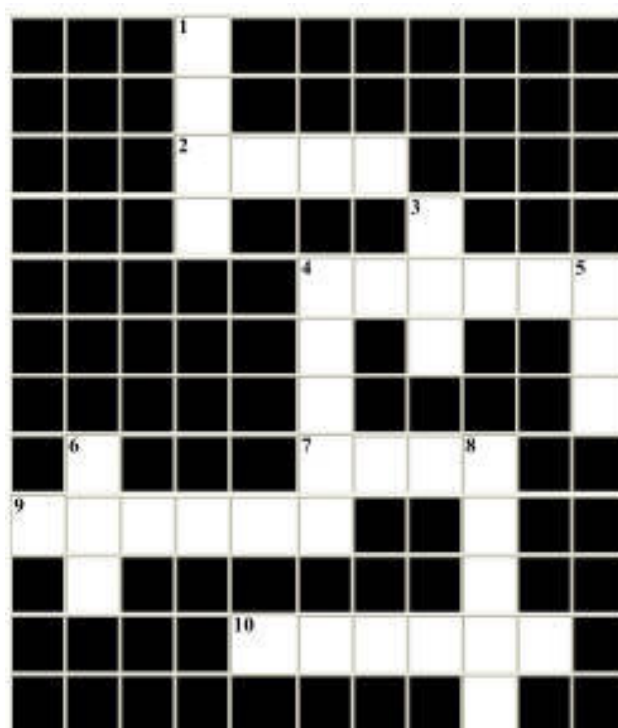
Figure 1. Crossword

Down:
1 Take the _____ by the horns: Face a challenge or danger boldly
3 _____ nap: A short sleep.
4 Kill two _____ with one stone: Getting two things done at once.
5 _____ race: Fierce competitive struggle for power.
6 Holy _____: Exclamation expressing surprise.
8 Black _____ of the family: A worthless or disgraced member of a family.

Across:
2 Keep the _____'s share: The biggest portion
4 Eager _____: Person who is excited about doing a certain work.
7 Raining cats and _____: Raining heavily
9 Hold your _____: Wait and be patient
10 The _____ work: Hard, boring part of a job or work.

Blogs

Blogging is another medium that can be explored in order to build the writing skills of learners. The teacher can ask the students to view existing blogs such as http://animalethics.blogspot.in/ and create a similar blog. They can also make blog entries based on the lines taken from the speech such as "Man is the only creature that consumes without producing", or "All men are enemies. All animals are comrades." These entries can be in the form of comments, expressing agreement/disagreement with Old Major. Related topics can also be given for blog entries such as 'The caged love birds in my neighbour's balcony', or 'Experiments on animals for developing medicines and cosmetics'. These entries maybe graded for writing skills by the teacher.

YouTube

The teacher can encourage the students to read the entire novel. For those whose dominant style of learning is Aural, they can access the audio book which is available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky17KPgdsos. The students can even watch the animated version of *Animal Farm* on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6peo16naLok. Undoubtedly, these would be appealing to students and would lead to better comprehension of the text. It will also aid the development of Listening skills in English and are particularly useful for students who have spatial intelligence (Gardner, 1993).

Web Links

The extract from *Animal Farm* can also be used to sensitize students to the cause of animals and get them involved in animal welfare. In order to provide a greater understanding of animal rights, students can be directed towards related online resources. For example, a passage from the PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) website, an extract of which is given here could be used as a starting point to discuss the issue of Animal Rights.

Why Animal Rights?

Almost all of us grew up eating meat, wearing leather, and going to circuses and zoos. Many of us bought our beloved "pets" at pet shops, had guinea pigs, and kept beautiful birds in cages. We wore wool and silk, ate McDonald's burgers, and fished. We never considered the impact of these actions on the animals involved. For whatever reason, you are now asking the question: Why should animals have rights?

The full text of this passage is available at: http://www.peta.org/about/why-peta/why-animal-rights.aspx. Students can be directed to similar passages which can be found at following link http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-m/singer01.htm

Another interesting link on animal rights is available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/animals/rights/rights_1.shtml. While making a case for animal rights, the webpage presents points in favour and against the issue. Here again, the students will not only delve deeper into the matter but also be acquainted with the stylistic and discourse aspects of a debate/an argument. A popular line from *Animal Farm*, "All are equal but some are more equal than others", can be used as a topic of a debate on animal rights. This may happen within the classroom or in an online discussion forum with classmates or peers from across the world. A teacher can organize Skype conferences and play the role of a moderator. This could pave the way for schools across the country and the world to connect with each other without being physically present, leading to greater collaboration and sharing. Teachers can also observe and assess the spoken English skills of the students as they exchange their views.

Mobile Learning or m-Learning

Another way to generate interest in the welfare of animals would be for students to use their mobiles as a medium to communicate their views on the subject. They can be asked to communicate their immediate reaction to the violation of animal rights via SMS. For this, they will have to create one-line slogans and message it to the teacher and to each other. The best slogan can be voted for by the peers and the winning student can be rewarded. The teacher can provide inputs on the language used in these slogans.

TEDtalks

TEDtalks with its tag line 'Ideas worth spreading' can be a good way to inspire students. This series of talks made by eminent people from various fields lasts for a maximum of eighteen minutes. The teacher may ask the learners to search online for TEDtalks on animal rights. Some examples of TEDtalks on animal welfare/animal rights can be found at the following links:

i. *Dyan deNapoli (2011) on 'The great penguin rescue' available online at http://www.ted.com/talks/dyan_ denapoli_the_ great_penguin _rescue.html*

ii. John Kasaona (2010) on 'How poachers became caretakers available online at http://www.ted.com/talks/john_kasaona_ from_ poachers_to_caretakers.html.

Some ideas using TEDtalks, as suggested in kalinago.blogspot can be adopted by the teachers. For instance the students can be asked to make a list of new or interesting words related to animal welfare that they come across in the talk. Another activity is to list down the 'wh- questions' on the board- who/what/where/when/why/how. After watching the video students can answer these questions and have a discussion.

Twitter

Twitter, a micro blogging tool, is a useful medium for practicing the target language. Learners can follow animal rights activists such as @ShenitaEtwaroo or @PeterSinger on Twitter. An activity based on a tweet (Singer, 2013) like the one in the box below will help the learner practice his/her writing skills. It will also be an exciting way for the learner to be involved in a social activity:

Peter Singer @PeterSinger
Australian Prime Minister accepts challenge to go meat-free for 2 weeks! Email her & ask her when she will do it.

T-shirt Posters

Students can design posters, individually or in groups, using software such as Adobe Photoshop or CorelDraw to create awareness about animal rights. The research would require them to do some reading online as well as offline and frame appropriate tag lines for their campaigns. They can use the slogans that they composed during the m-learning exercise discussed earlier. Posters, like the one shown in Figure 2, can be designed and printed on t-shirts, which can be part of a class campaign on animal rights.
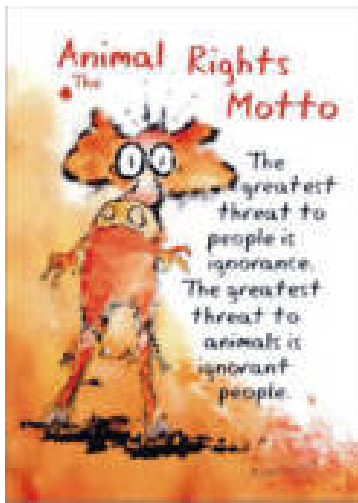
Figure 2. Example of a poster on animal rights.

Search Engines

Since *Animal Farm* is a critique on Communism with an emphasis on the Stalin era, a cross curricular approach can be adopted here. The language teacher can request the History or Political Science teacher to talk to the students about Communism, Socialism and Stalin. Students on their part could read up on these topics on Wikipedia or other websites. This will help them get a deeper insight into some of the major '-isms' that have influenced world history.

The students can also be engaged in project work. The class can be divided into groups. Each group can look at different aspects of the issue, e.g., one group could look at the legal aspects of Animal Rights such as anti-poaching laws. Another group could use search engines such as Google to get information on various wildlife sanctuaries and parks in India while another group could be asked to conduct a research on endangered animals.

WebQuests

A WebQuest is a method that facilitates inquiry-based learning by providing a varied research experience. The learners gather information from resources on the Internet and engage in a variety of tasks online. An example of a WebQuest on *Animal Farm* can be accessed at http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=153189. In fact the various activities discussed earlier can be put together in a single WebQuest.

Conclusion

In this article, we have suggested activities that involve media that are used almost every day both by students as well as teachers. The variety provided by these activities and the fun element in them would ensure active participation of the students in the learning process. In addition to developing linguistic skills, the cross-cultural nature of these activities would bring about sensitivity and awareness in the students.

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Roseliz Francis is a Research and Teaching Assistant at Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi. She is pursuing her PhD in ELT. Her areas of interest include Business English, Language Pathology and Educational Technology.

roselizfrancis@gmail.com

Anju S. Gupta is a Professor of English at Indira Gandhi National Open University. Her interests are ELT, Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics, and Materials Production. She has published extensively in material and international journals on grammar, speaking and listening skills.

anjusgupta7@gmail.com