

Basic Steps for Developing English Language Web-Based Tutorials

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Abstract

Learning English should not be restricted to learning in the classrooms. With the various technologies that we have, teachers, in particular, have to be selective and productive to ensure that their teaching is useful, varied, and interesting. One of the ways is by promoting web-based learning to the students. Since there is no English language website designed specifically for the local students, teachers have to take a step further in which they should start designing websites that cater to the needs of their learners. Thus, this paper aims to present the key elements of designing English language web-based tutorials that suit the students' needs.

Introduction

The development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has given great impact in most fields including education, specifically to the teaching of the English language. Recently, we notice that teachers have started using ICT in their teaching rather than just focusing on teacher talk, textbooks dependent, as well as classroom limited environment and approach. If we browse the Internet, we can find more than two million websites designed or developed for teaching and learning the English language. This shows that more and more course developers, teachers, and learners have come to realize the use of ICT in English language teaching and learning. Among the most popular websites for English language teaching and learning are BBC English (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/index.shtml), Dave's ESL Cafe (www.eslcafe.com), Global English (www.globalenglish.com), and English Language Resources for Teachers and Students of English (www.eltweb.com/liason).

According to McKenzie (1998), the use of web-based tutorials on the Internet has had a substantial impact on the nature of university teaching for it has brought about a major improvement in the ability of students to read, write, and reason. The new instructional technologies such as computers and the Internet have made language learning becomes more interactive and interesting. The use of email and chat rooms or forums, for example, can promote communication and discussions between teachers and learners or among learners. Some researchers like Tunku Mohani (1998), Zuwati (1998), Muehleisen (1997), and Michael (1996), agree that computers are practically valuable to the language teaching and learning for they encourage and motivate learners, promote autonomous learning, integrate all the skills needed in language learning, provide immediate feedback and allow self-paced learning.

A Shift of Paradigm

Wedemeyer (1991) as quoted in Chakravarthy (2004) mentioned that "technological developments demand new, innovative approaches to learning and living." The change in technological tools has somehow affected the nature of our jobs as teachers and the needs of our clients, the learners. In this case, we need to make a shift in the methods or approaches used, the role of the teachers, the role of the learners. This is supported by Pandian&Narasiman (2003) in Shaker (2004):

"the teaching profession in the new millennium has taken a more challenging task and in order to breed students that are knowledgeable and informed, teachers require more than the traditional teaching method...teachers have to be aware of the effective use of technology..."

Figure 1 below summarizes the shift of paradigm in language teaching and learning as outlined by Supyan (2004)

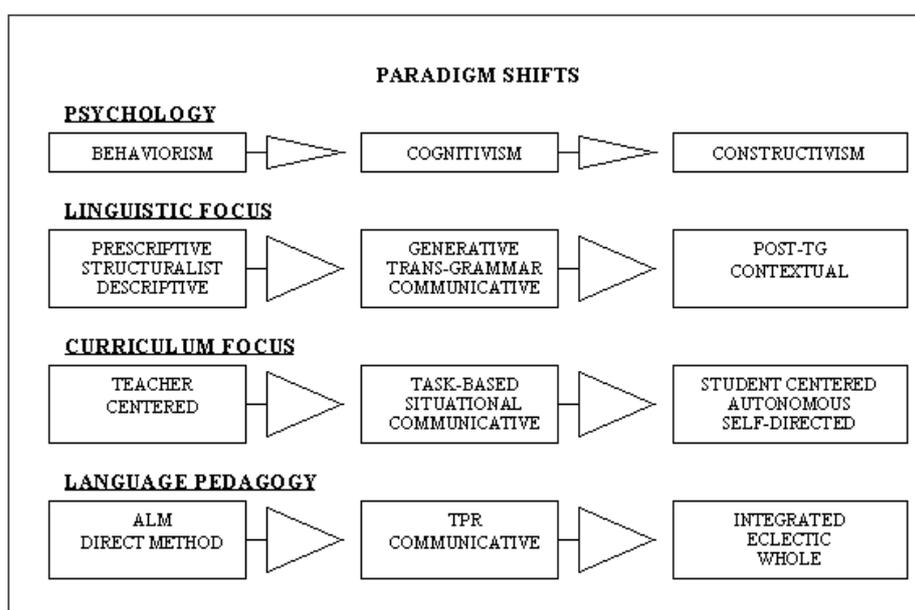


Figure 1: Shift of paradigm in language teaching and learning (Supyan, 2004)

As technology develops, the nature of language teaching and learning also experiences immediate changes in terms of approach, methodology, and pedagogy. The focus is now more on constructivist approach whereby teachers need to play multi-roles: instructor - facilitator - manager - designer. With this approach, learners are being responsible for their own in which learning is autonomous and self-directed. With ICT development, teachers also could use an integrated and eclectic kind of approach or technique in teaching the target language.

The Need for Tailored Web-Based Tutorials

The needs of the English learners may differ from one country to another or from one institution to another institution. Most of the web pages for language teaching and learning are designed by lesson designers or educators from the west and some from other

Asian countries such as Singapore, Korea, and Japan. These existing web pages for English Language learning may be too general or may not be suitable for our local students, Malaysians. It is undeniable that there are some websites designed by the local teachers, however, that particular websites are usually designed for a particular group of learners or they are too general and do not cater to the needs of certain groups of English language learners. Hence, the local English teachers need to design web pages or web-based tutorials that suit their students' learning needs.

Some teachers are reluctant to design web pages or web-based tutorials due to several reasons. They are:

- i. lack of computer knowledge;
- ii. do not know how to design and what program/software to choose;
- iii. do not know what to include on the website; and
- iv. lack of time

There are many things to be put into consideration when designing the web page. For instance, when teachers want to develop a web-based tutorial, they must, first, be computer literate. Then, they have to study the needs of the learners and analyze the existing teaching objectives and perhaps come up with the new teaching and learning objectives that suit the needs of the students. Besides, they also need to select the necessary materials to be put online, develop interactive activities, decide on the tasks and exercises, etc.

Realizing the problems faced by most of the teachers, we cannot blame them for not being willing to design the web page for their teaching purposes because designing the web-based tutorials requires careful planning, needs a lot of preparation and is time-consuming. Thus certain guidelines should be given to assist teachers in planning and thus making the process of designing the English language web-based tutorials becomes easier and faster. Teachers should be introduced to the basic steps for developing the web page that will benefit both the teacher and their English language students. It is hoped that the 5-BASIC STEPS presented in this paper will encourage the English language teachers to develop English language web-based tutorials for their respective students. Once teachers have developed the English web-based tutorials, they can then vary their teaching approaches and strategies, thus making teaching and learning more interesting and meaningful.

5 Steps to Designing Web-Based Tutorials

In designing a language course, Hutchinson & Waters (1994) were of the idea that "designing a course is fundamentally a matter of asking questions to provide a reasoned basis for the subsequent processes of syllabus design, materials writing, classroom teaching, and evaluation." From that idea, they came out with a framework for syllabus designing that uses WH-questions as the basics such as why do the students need to learn? who is going to be involved in the process? where is the learning to take place? when is the learning to take place? what do the students need to learn? how will the learning be achieved?

Dubin&Olshtain (1990), also, suggested that a syllabus or a course outline should ideally describe:

- what the learners are expected to know at the end of the course (course objectives);
- what is to be taught or learned during the course;
- when it is to be taught and at what rate of progress;
- what are the different levels or stages;
- how it is to be taught (suggesting procedures, techniques, and materials);
- how it is to be evaluated (suggesting testing and evaluating mechanisms).

By adapting the work of Hutchinson&Waters and Dubin&Olshtain, a framework of 5 basic steps for developing English web-based tutorials is constructed. Figure 2 below represents the 5 Basic STEPS for developing English web-based tutorials.

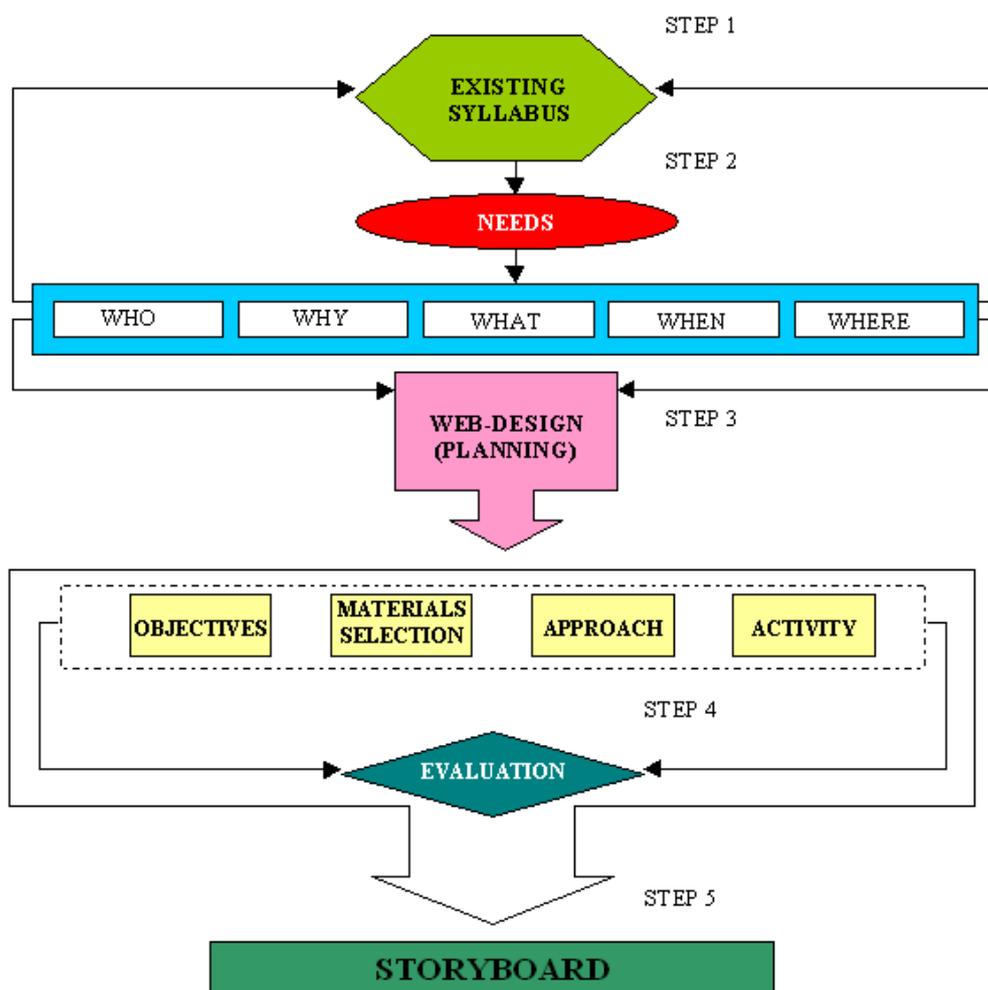


Figure 2: Steps Involved in Designing English Web-Based Tutorials

Here is the description of the stages presented in Figure 2:

5 BASIC STEPS TO DESIGN/DEVELOP WEB-BASED TUTORIALS

STEP 1 - STUDY

- The first thing that teachers or web developers need to do is to study the various existing syllabi that are designed specifically for learning English of a particular level. This is to ensure that the web-based tutorials which we are going to design match with the course standards or general aims of the course.

STEP 2 - NEEDS ANALYSIS

- Teachers and web-developers need to carry out a needs analysis (using WH-questions as the scaffolding of their needs analysis questionnaires - WHO, WHY, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and HOW). Teachers also have to be aware that all the questions generated must be relevant and helpful in determining the specific course objectives and the course contents.

- It is also important to carry out the needs analysis study to ensure that the lessons we are going to designed do match the needs of the learners.

STEP 3 - WEB-DESIGN PLANNING STAGE

- Based on the NEEDS ANALYSIS, we have to determine the specific objectives and arrange them according the appropriate level - Basic, Intermediate, or Upper Intermediate.

- Once, teachers have arranged the specific objectives into appropriate level, they then need to select suitable materials that match the specific course objectives, as well as the levels.

- Teachers will have to focus and look at the course objectives very closely for they will help us in selecting the material selection.

- Once the materials are selected, teachers then need to decide on the approaches. Deciding on the approaches will help the teachers to design the kind of activities for a particular lesson. In terms of approach, teachers can use either task-based approach or content-based approach or an eclectic. The approach used will then determine the roles of the teachers and learners, as well as the activities or tasks to be set for the web-based tutorials.

- At this stage, teachers need to again ask questions like:

1. What are the specific objectives?
2. What materials are to be used?
3. What kind of approaches to be incorporated?
4. What kind of activities to be included/ designed?

STEP 4 - EVALUATION

- At this stage, teachers need to evaluate the materials collected or gathered.

- Evaluation on the materials gathered and activities designed is done to ensure that the materials and activities fit the objectives, approaches, and the needs of the learners.

STEP 5 - STORYBOARD

- A storyboard should be written to ensure the flow of the web and the lessons presented.

- Storyboard is necessary for it helps web-designers or teachers to organize their lessons and activities in a feasible way.

- At this stage, we need to take the following into consideration (Windeatt, Hardisty,&Eastment (2000):

level of student

time/duration

objectives (purpose of a particular activities)
technical requirements
procedure (provide step-by-step instructions)
variations (activities for different levels)(follow-up activities)
A sample of the storyboard is presented in Appendix 1.

Windeatt, Hardisty,&Eastment (2000) suggested that when designing the web activities, web-designers should take the following items into account:

1. Level - the level of student for which the activity is most likely to be suitable;
2. Time - a rough guide to the time the activity is likely to take;
3. Aims - the purpose of the activity (should match the course objectives);
4. TechnicalRequirements - the equipment and software needed for the activity;
5. Knowledge - any special knowledge needed for students to do the activity;
6. Preparation - what you have to do or prepare before the activity;
7. Procedure - provide step-by-step instructions for each activity;
8. Follow-up - suggestions for follow-up work, wither in class, or for self-access, or homework;
9. Variations - provide activities for students of different levels.

General Guidelines for Designing for Web-Based Tutorials

There are several other basic guidelines that teachers or web designers need to pay attention to when designing English web-based tutorials (based on the works of the researchers like Kelly (2000) and Snookes, Ohtake & Kubota (2001). When designing the web, we need to ensure that:

- a. the teaching materials presented are in a suitable format - e.g. the choices of background and font colors, font size, and font types;
- b. the site is useable by everyone of the target group regardless of their level of proficiency in the target language;
- c. the site is user-friendly in which users can navigate easily with a minimal number of clicks;
- d. the site is useful and fun to use;
- e. the site allows fast-loading pages by removing unnecessary objects or graphics; and
- f. the site does not violate copyrights.

Suggested Authoring Systems

Once teachers have followed the 5 steps, it is time for them to choose the program that they are going to use for developing their web-based tutorials. The easiest one is by using

the authoring systems. Two authoring systems can be suggested here which are quite simple for teachers to explore and work with. They are Microsoft FrontPage 2003 and Hot Potatoes. These two authoring systems are suggested because teachers can easily type their work in the Microsoft Word and then just transfer the information or the selected content via cut&paste procedures.

'Hot Potatoes' is developed by the University of Victoria CALL Laboratory Research and Development team. The Hot Potatoes suite includes six applications, which enable teachers to create interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering, and gap-fill exercises for the World Wide Web. With 'Hot Potatoes' authoring system, teachers are not required to have programming knowledge. In this authoring system, there is a tutorial section whereby teachers or course developers can learn from before they start using the system. 'Hot Potatoes' is a user-friendly system. For further information on Hot Potatoes please go to <http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked/>. Here are the examples of Hot Potatoes Suite (University of Victoria):

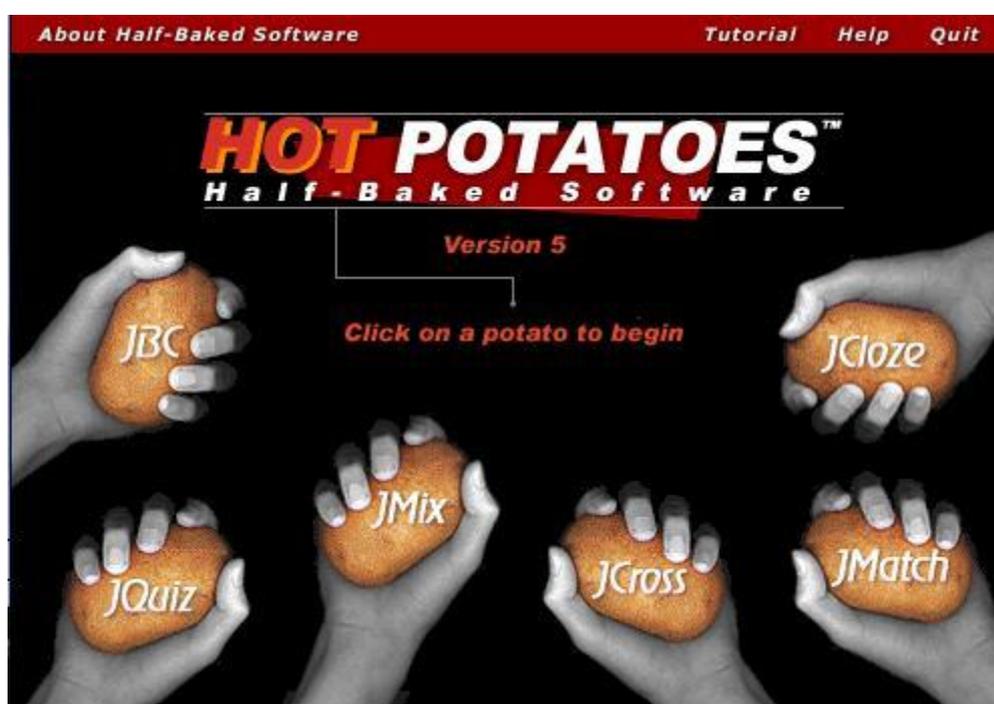


Figure 3: Hot Potatoes Suite

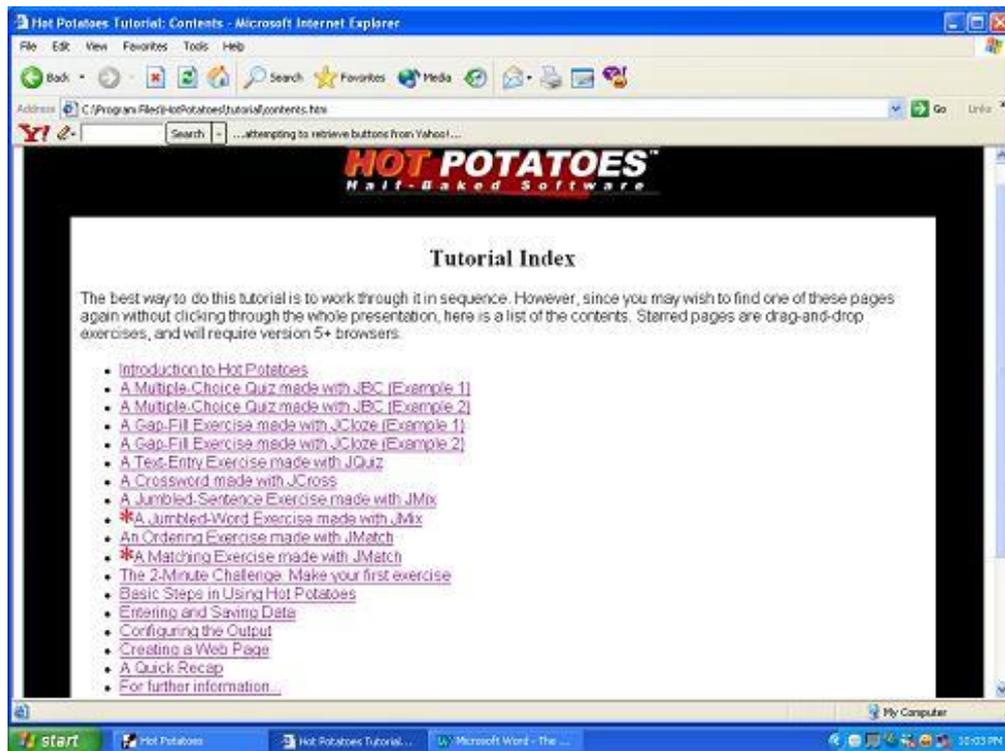


Figure 4: Tutorial Index

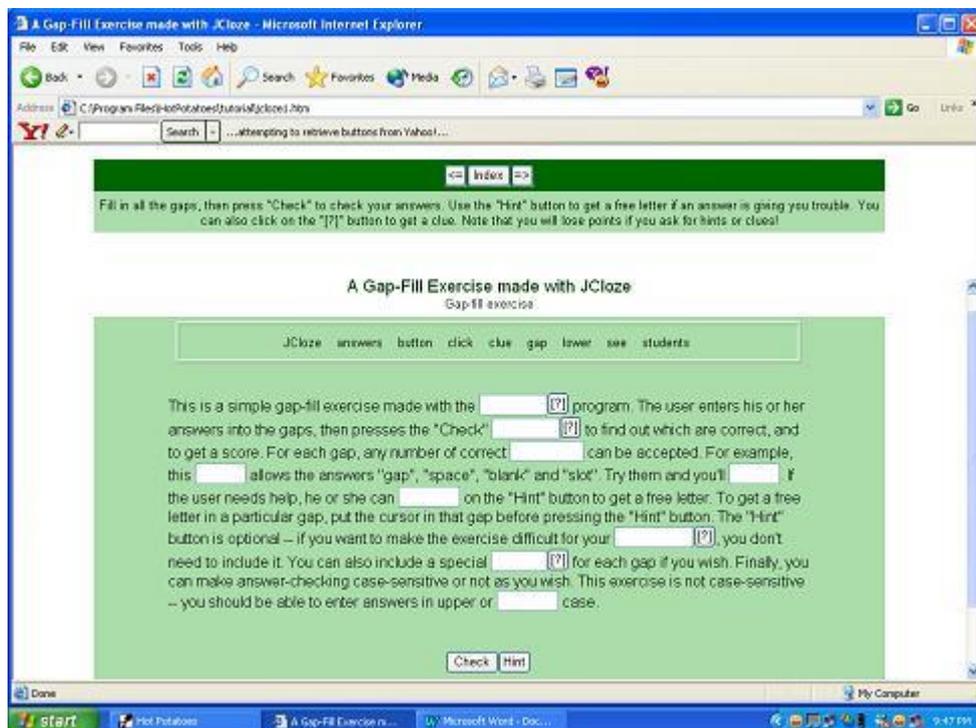


Figure 5: A Gap-fill Exercise Sample

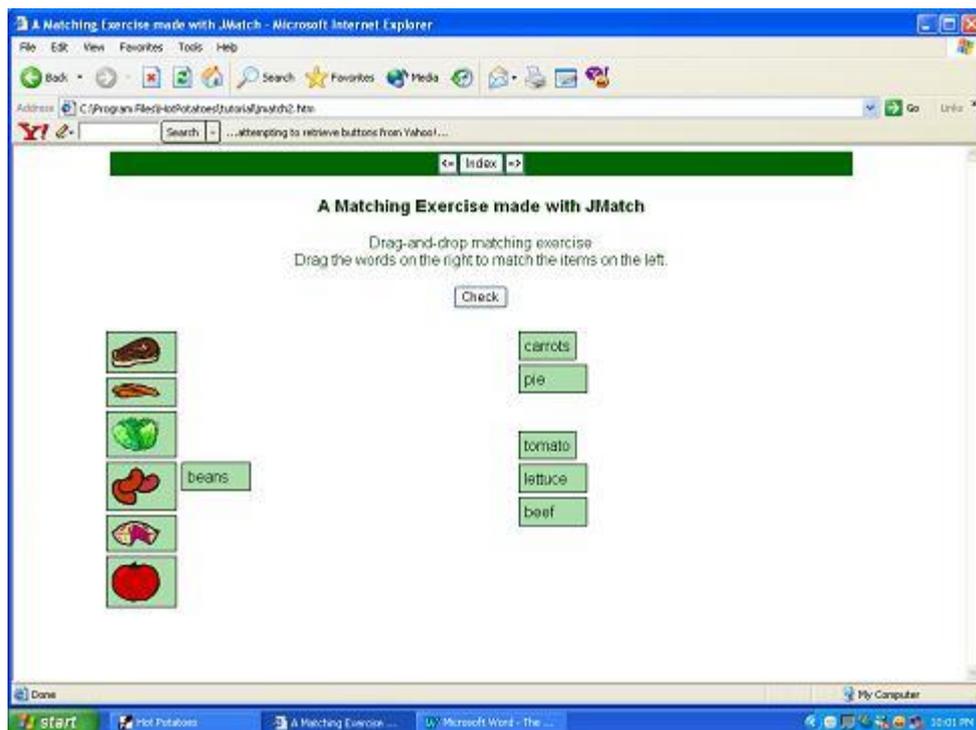


Figure 6: A Matching Exercise Sample

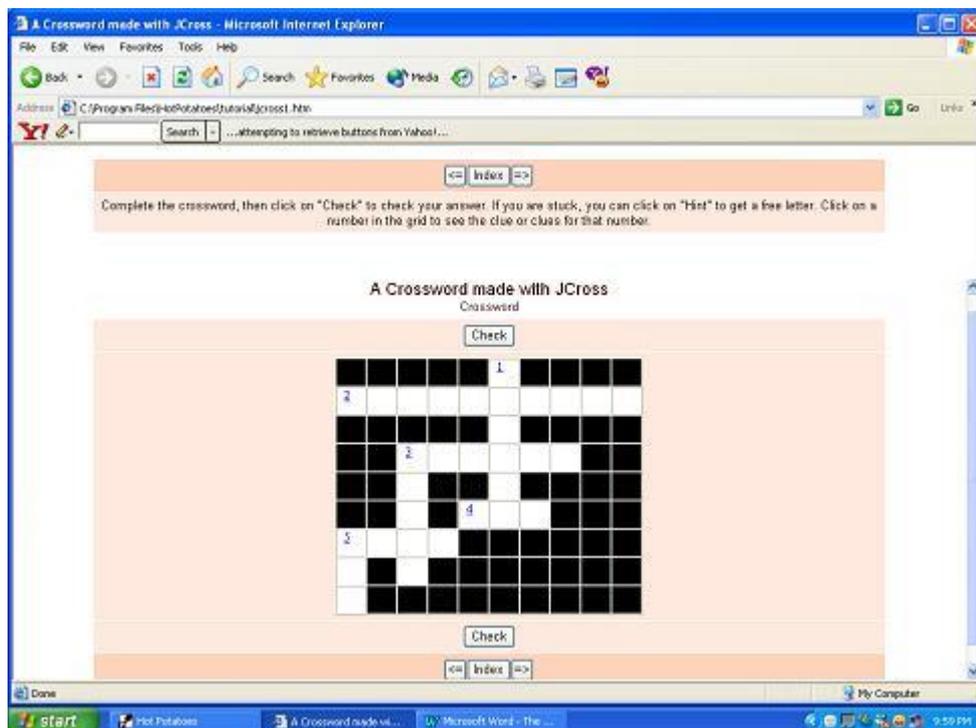


Figure 7: A Crossword Exercise Sample

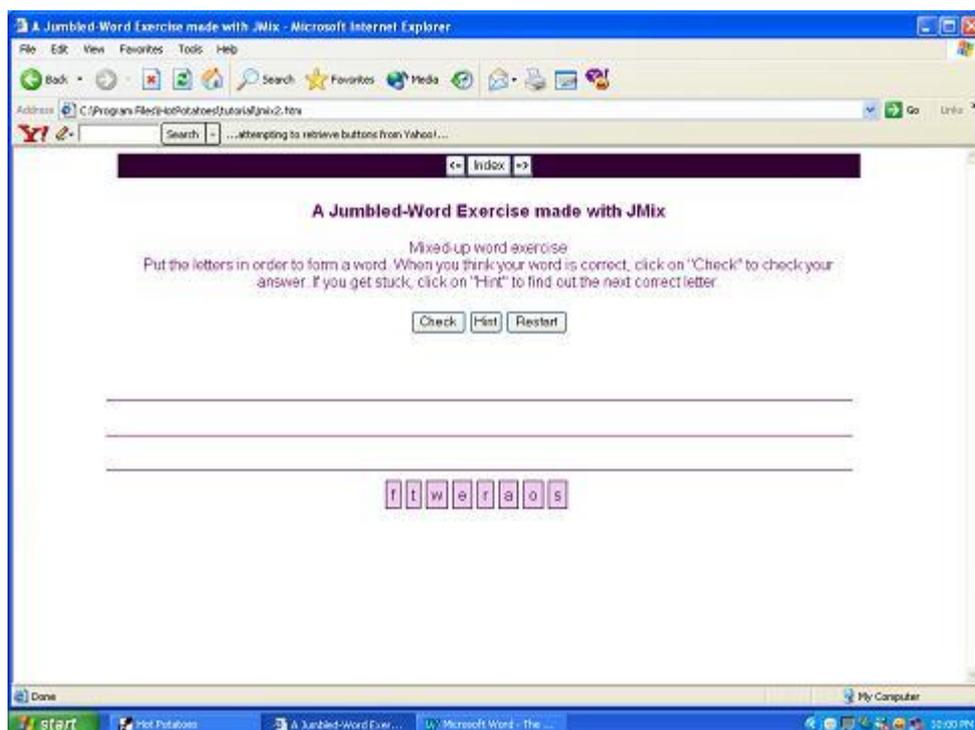
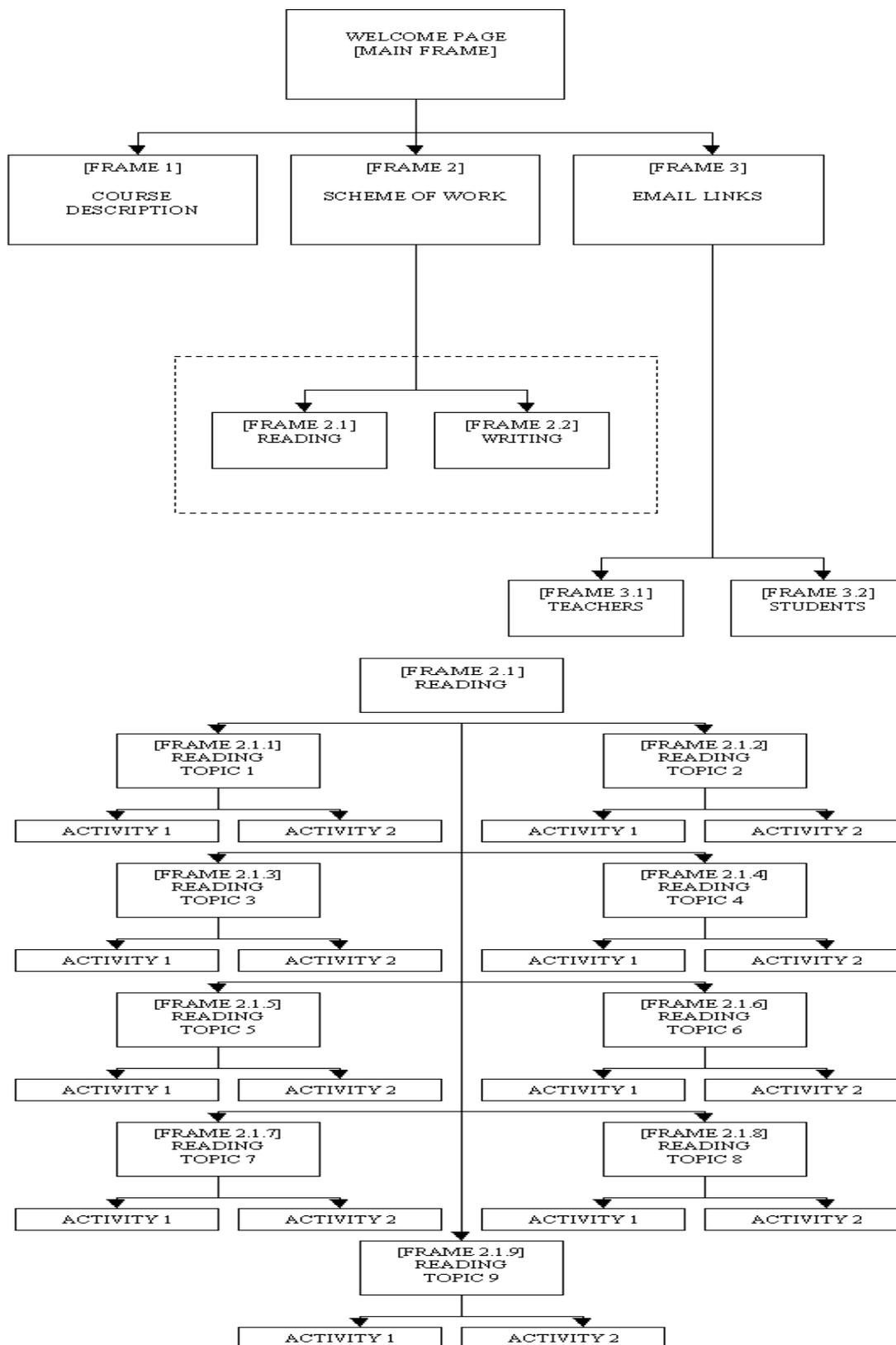


Figure 8: A Jumbled Word Exercise Sample

Source: Hot Potatoes, University of Victoria

'FrontPage 2003', on the other hand, is an authoring system developed by Microsoft. Users or teachers who are quite new in the designing of web-page can develop their web pages using the template given. In FrontPage 2003, users are given a choice to either use the templates given or to create their own desired web page. Another advantage of using this software is that users can combine the activities created using 'Hot Potatoes' into the FrontPage 2003 and it can be updated at any time.

Appendix 1



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