Web-based ESL courses: A search for industry standards

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Abstract

This paper considers the criteria that should be used when assessing an online language school. So far, there have been very few, if any, discussions of online language schools in the CALL literature. There is a considerable body of research into the influence of technology on open learning and distance education. None of this, however, addresses the problem that faces a potential learner when they first investigate an online school. Specifically, this paper proposes a framework for evaluating online web school sites. It discusses a number of these sites in the light of the proposed framework and then goes on to describe the authors' attempts to enrol into a number of them. The paper concludes by looking at the potential problems facing the schools and their students and concludes that the concept of cyberschooling is still at too early a stage in its development to fulfil the promise it appears to hold.

Introduction

A recent newspaper article in the Melbourne newspaper, The Age (7 Aug. 1999) entitled 'Teaching by the minute', outlined an initiative by the Australian State Government of Victoria to provide online tutorial support for year 12 students in a range of subjects. Victoria's Education Department has agreed with a private company to set up a website that links students to a range of teachers, each accessible by email, and each ready to provide one-to-one online support for students needing help with their assessment tasks. (The URL for this company is http://www.Worldschool.com/).

This is a clear indication that mainstream education is beginning to recognise the viability of real-time online teaching, and that web-based delivery of some forms of education is gaining a legitimacy that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago. It also indicates that a significant sector of the education industry considers

web-based delivery to be cost-effective.

The growing legitimisation of web-based education coincides with a growth in the number of websites that claim to be 'virtual' English language learning centres. Some of these 'virtual' schools are free, but an increasing number of them demand payment for enrolment. Many of them claim to be a viable alternative to face-to-face teaching for students who cannot or will not attend more traditional language classes. However, a lack of consistent educational standards can make a student's choice of a 'cyberschool' a somewhat hit-and-miss affair.

As web-based learning becomes more acceptable within the wider community, and the number of cyberschools increases, it will be necessary for teachers and learners to have a set of criteria that will enable them to evaluate these cyberschools. This paper investigates a number of cyberschools currently available on the Web and attempts to provide some initial discussion on what these criteria might be.

Background

While several investigations have been published exploring the influence of technology on the provision of open learning and distance education, and while many of these studies discuss the advantages and disadvantages of online delivery (see, for instance, Tella 1996), none of them address the problem that faces a potential learner when they first investigate an online school.

There appear to be very few discussions of online language schools as such in the literature. The 'schools' are of course a manifestation of distance learning and so it may be useful to examine them in the context of distance education. Sussex argues that there are strong links between distance learning and open learning, and describes the major features of both forms of learning thus:

both distance education and open-access learning involve high levels of student control and direction … And both, if well designed and delivered, allow students to learn in ways that make reduced demands on a scarce human resource. (Sussex, 1991). Sussex (1991) goes on to describe how in the previous decade an increasing number of institutions had begun offering undergraduate language courses in the distance mode.

A framework for evaluation

Sandery (1993) outlines a number of positives and negatives for open learning which are particularly valuable starting points for an examination of cyberschool sites:

On the positive side:

- open learning focuses on students and learning outcomes for students rather than inputs, institutional structures, and teachers;
- an open learning approach makes the quality of courseware and student support structures highly visible to a wide audience;
- an open learning approach requires that assessment requirements be explicit before a course is commenced;

On the cautionary side:

- most people need and want contact with other people as part of their learning experiences;
- some externally set deadlines and other structures may improve the learning outcomes for most students;
- open learning approaches require study and other skills that are usually acquired in more structured learning environments and hence may be more applicable to mature students;
- courseware development and delivery systems may require substantial 'upfront' investment;

Methodology

We based our investigations on Sandery's points and set out to discover how many of the sites exploited the positives and attempted to cope actively with the negatives. In our evaluation of the sites we looked for the following;

- a clearly defined syllabus and teaching approach;
- the range and levels of learning materials offered;
- evidence of instruments for student assessment;
- the ability to access a teacher when required;
- the quality of teaching materials including the design of teaching materials,

adequate variety and sufficient workload for the type of program offered;
- the existence of any form of face-to-face teaching;
- the nature of help available for students (not only for ways to learn but also what to do with the task in hand);
- value for money, which included educationally effective materials and an adequate quantity of materials;
- an indication of the length of the course.

Our investigations were in three stages: (1) identify several suitable cyberschools; (2) assess them according to the set of common criteria based on the list above, and 3) enrol into a number of the cyberschools to assess their viability as learning resources.

The cyberschools

The sites we investigated were mainly taken from a list to be found on the Dave's ESL Café website, but we also included other sites that we came across on the Web that seemed relevant to our investigation. Not all of the sites on the ESL Cafe site were relevant or appropriate: some were advertisements for traditional language schools, and some were part of tertiary credit courses and closed to the general public. The number of sites at Dave's ESL Cafe website that were relevant to our research was, therefore, somewhat reduced.

The assessment

Following the classification outlined above, we evaluated the sites according to the following criteria:

- The site's country of origin. This is likely to influence the kind of English it teaches. If a student wants to learn British English (seen by many cultures as the most desirable form of English), the potential student is more likely to go to a UK site than one in the US;
- The equipment that a student would need. The more complex the equipment, the greater the potential overall cost of enrolment, which is likely to affect the kind of student capable of enrolling;
- Access to a 'real' teacher online. This is a good indication of the level of

individualised instruction available;

- The length of the courses, and where possible the number of lessons a week. This affects the overall value of the program: the more hours offered, the cheaper the program should be;

- What its syllabus is and whether or not it has a teaching philosophy. This should be an indication of the level of professionalism of the teachers behind the web pages, particularly if the site expects students to enrol into a course of a defined length;

- The type of instruction offered: for example if there is a business English option, or if it concentrates mainly on writing skills;

- The cost.

Enrolment

Urai, the 'learner' in our team, intended first to enrol into many free sites, and then into several fee-paying sites. As will be explained below, the second stage of the enrolment activities was not carried out.

Findings

Cyberschools

The schools we investigated are presented in Appendix B. Broadly speaking, the websites in Appendix B can be divided into four types:

Pages from college or university courses

Table 1

From Dave's ESL Cafe (http://www.eslcafe.com/search/Online English Courses/)

	Site	Place	Equipment needed	Access to teacher?	Course Length	Teaching Philosophy	Type of instruction offered	Cost
1	English Connection http://www.englishconnection.com/EConline/Default.htm	US	Audio	yes			Information only after students sends details of self	
3	Cyberlangues http://www.cyberlangues.com/	France	PC (Pentium)	No			No details until enrolment	
5	Ed USA Online Welcome http://www.edusaonline.com/	US	MAC/PC Email Audio PowerPoint	Yes (via email)	30days	Collaborative learning Real-time instruction	Writing skills, Science & technology University study, Management	$US 300
7	English Page - Free Online English Lessons http://www.englishpage.com/	US		No	On-going		Weekly lesson Vocab, grammar, other resources	Free
8	English on-line reading http://www.sfs.nju.edu.cn/test.htm	China		Yes -to monitor discussion			4 books, 18 units For students of English at the Chinese Uni of Nanjing	Free (but not for general public)
9	English Through the Internet http://mofetsrv.macam98.ac.jl/~elaine//eti/	US/ Israel					English program between two universities - teacher trainee students and ESL students Academic reading & creative writing	Free (but not for general public)
10	English Tuition Online - English for your needs http://www.arborio.com/english/online.html	Australia		Yes	6 wks (2x3 wk modules)	Learning by recognition of prior experience	Writing-based: Revision of 3-5 page draft then submission of 5 page text	A$80 special A$135 usually
11	English Online http://www.englishonline.net/	US?	Audio	Yes	3-week units or ongoing		Lesson a day Writing program Idiom each day	25 lessons $US 25 Fee
12	EnglishSpace http://www.englishspace.ort.org/	UK	Email	No	Ongoing		Listserver Pre-intermed & Intermed 12-16 year olds	Free
13	Englishtown http://www.englishtown.com/	US	Audio	No			Daily lesson Monthly audio lesson	Free
14	Fullerton College composition online http://staff-www.fullcoll.edu/~lkennedy/Online.htm	US		US semester			College course: Requires 4 classes on campus	Closed
15	Language Learning Forum http://www.sfc.keio.ac.jp/~kabune27/	Japan		No	Uni semester		Open to others Provides English lessons	Free
16	Compuhigh [1] http://compuhigh.com/info/	US	Audio	Email & By list	Ongoing		Online lessons Online class (email chat) Daily posting responding to student questions	1 wk free $50 /mth

17	EuroTitle Email Course http://www.eurotitle.freeserve.co.uk/	UK	Email	Yes By Email		Learn by doing	Individual lessons. Each lesson is different	
19	Knowledge 2000 http://toefl.telecampus.com/	US	Email	Yes By Email	Ongoing		TOEFL Preparation 3 courses: 1 & 2 TOEFL Preparation 3 How to register for TOEFL	
20	Web-English http://members.aol.com/webenglis/index.htm	UK	Netmeeting2.1 PC PC camera	Yes	3 weeks		3 50min lessons a week + work before class General Business English	£90 1 st £120 2 sts £105/140
21	Learn2.com http://www.Learn2.com/	US		No	Ongoing		Teaches virtually everything - not a specialised ESL school (eg 'Learn to write to your congressman')	
22	Net English teacher http://homes.arealcity.com/lcnet/	UK	Netmeeting email	Yes	Ongoing		1-teacher site depends on student requirement	1 lesson free £27/ hr
23	NetLearn Languages - The On-Line Language School http://www.nll.co.uk/	UK	PC Netmeeting 3.01	Yes	2-12 wks		Tues/Thursday or Mon/Wed/Fri 3 hrs online + 3 hrs in pairs assignments to finish Operates 9.00am-8.30 pm UK time	£33 2 wks £175 12 wks
24	Study English Online for Free http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/9260/online.html	Canada	Email Conferen-cing Centre	Yes	Ongoing		1 lesson/wk at one of 3 levels (ie 1 every 3 weeks per level) Discussions via conferencing centre Grammar explanations Blank filling exercises	Free
26	Roggy's ESLweb http://www.eslweb.net/			Yes	Monthly		Academic writing, conversational English, business writing, custom class. Free classroom - Blank filling exercises Grammar describe picture (for T feedback) All feedback on discussion page (4 students)	$50 month Free
28	Surf2School.com http://www.surf2school.com/english/	US	Netmeeting	Yes	3 months	Use Jack Richards New Interchange textbook	2 free lessons 1 online lesson + 4 netmeetings per week	$300 3 mths
29	TestDEN: Your Personal TOEFL Trainer [2] http://www.testden.com/	Canada	Audio	No	2 months		16 hrs audio 7000 toefl questions personalized study guide email test tips sample of listening and idioms exercise	$69 60 days
30	The English Writing Academy [3] http://www.english-writing.co.uk/	UK	Email	Yes By email	8 weeks		Weekly email lesson Chat room with students	£80 8 weeks

Other sites (not found on *Dave's* ESL Caf site)

	Site	Place	Equipment needed	Access to teacher?	Course Length	Teaching Philosophy	Type of instruction offered	Cost
31	The Internet Mini-Course http://www.public.iastate.edu/~hschmidt/minicourse.html	US	email	Yes	ongoing	Reflective learning to teach internet skills	Vocab exercies, reading comprehension on internet matters	free
32	Guide to Grammar and Writing http://webster.comnet.edu/HP/pages/darling/grammar.htm	US		no	ongoing		Grammar Principles of composition etc (For native speakers)	free
33	English by E-mail http://www.EnglishLearner.com	US	email	yes	ongoing		Commerical site selling/advertising books etc 'Grammar, vocabulary, reading, crosswords, hangman andmore' materials 'every week'	free
34	English for the Internet http://www.study.com/	US	Palace vreality s/w (free demo version)	yes		Part of a teaching project at Berkely by volunteer teachers to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of online education	Real time classes (Australian times included) Online classes: Toefl preparation ESP, Grammar & writing, Language and culture, etc	free
35	Online English http://scuoleitalia.com/online-english/	Italy	email	yes	ongoing		'Weekly lesson by email' (one lesson at one of three levels each week)	free

Notes:
1 (Compuhigh) In the online chatroom only 4 respondents had posted messages, most were asking about how to enrol or remove themselves.
2 (TestDEN) This is the most 'human' site of all of them, with photographs of people and lively graphics
3 (English Writing Academy) This site publishes timetables - but there are none after May 1999, which implies that the site had very few students.

There were a number of these on the Dave's ESL Cafe site, some requiring a college student number before they could be accessed. The ones that are accessible to the general public are included in Table 1 (8, 9, 14, 15) (the numbers in brackets in the rest of this paper refer to the entries in Table 1). They range from colleges in the US to universities in Japan and include a teacher-training course that takes the form of an interchange between teacher trainees in the US and ESL learners in Israel. These are interesting only to the extent that they underline the trend elsewhere for sites that consist of a range of self-access materials with a teacher available in the background, to be called on when help is required. If one of these sites is open to the general public, it is usually because the outside students are being used for some form of research. A good example is Number 34, whose introductory pages contain the following explanation:

> The purpose of the project is to explore and expand the educational potential of the Internet by offering free online instruction by volunteer teachers to students from all over the world, in order, in part, to facilitate the learning of English by students who might otherwise not have access to, or resources for, 'real world' and/or paying classes; and in part to identify:

- the advantages and disadvantages of online education as compared to traditional in-class education, and
- the optimal methods for instruction and learning within the online

environment.

One cannot help wondering how many students there are worldwide who 'do not have access to, or resources for, real-world and/or paying classes', but do have access to a computer, an Internet service provider and a phone line.

Sites delivering content

Virtually every site in this category calls itself an online English course. This group of sites, however, provides little if any interaction between student and software, and none at all between student and teacher. Most of these sites contain lists of information on traditional English courses (see 7, 24), and provide a small number of language exercises. An example of this category is The Internet Mini-Course, maintained by Helen Hoyt Schmidt (31). The website contains a set of definitions and explanations about the course Schmidt is involved with, some simple English tests, and a sample lesson or two. For reading comprehension exercises the site typically provides a reading text and some comprehension questions which students must print out and work with offline. This would be a useful resource for teachers in a traditional classroom, but not for students working on their own, as there appear to be no opportunities for having their work corrected.

Interactive pages without teacher-student communication

In this category are some sites containing interactive learning material such as tests and quizzes (11, 13, 24, 30). Interactive material allows users/students to type input into an on-screen task and receive immediate feedback. An example of this is Guide to Grammar and Writing (32), which is a comprehensive reference to grammar and writing. Each learning module is followed by interactive language exercises and quizzes. By working through these, students can test their understanding of the learning modules previously provided by the teachers. Since this website has some JavaScript routines embedded in it, students can get immediate feedback on their work.

Even though there is no active communication between the teacher and the students on these sites, students can sometimes get forms of feedback that are quite sophisticated, even to the extent of being told why what they've done is wrong and what they need to revisit in a particular learning module.

Full-blown virtual school

The schools in this category are similar to each other in that they offer ongoing tuition which includes a facility to interact with a teacher and (usually) with other enrolled students via chat-room or real-time online communication.

They do, however, differ considerably from each other in several ways. Some are free (such as 24 or 31), while others debit a monthly fee from each student's credit card until told to stop (16). Some offer a range of languages apart from English; some provide regular weekly or monthly teaching materials year-round (16, 19, 22, 24, 31, 33, 35), while others have discrete 'terms' and expect students to log into online tutorials using audio and video software (the most advanced of these is probably Number 5 in Table 1). Some are technically quite demanding: they expect students to have a fast computer with an audio card and a video camera (5, 20).

These schools are discussed at greater length in the next section.

Enrolment

It is not as easy to enrol into these sites as one would at first think. Urai Salam, our 'learner', attempted to enrol into a number of these, with varying success. Only two responded, and only one ever began sending learning materials. In the light of this experience, we decided not to enrol into any of the cyberschools that required a cash payment: we had a growing fear that the ones requiring payment might take our money and never respond.

Two online courses we tried to enrol into were very slow in responding. English for the Internet (34), for example, claims to offer comprehensive learning modules: English for business, English for special purposes, TOEFL preparation, Chatroom, and real-time classes where students around the world log in at a scheduled time to have a 'class' using free demo versions of virtual reality software that they have been told to download from the Web. When we subscribed to this course, it took two weeks before we got a (computerised) response apologising for the delay and promising to contact us as soon as possible. After two months of waiting, we were yet to 'enrol', and at the time of writing, there had still been no response. We had a similar experience with Online English_English as the International Language of Understanding (35). Despite displaying a set of very promising web pages, nobody appeared to be home. The only site we were finally able to enrol into was English by E-mail maintained by Elek Mathe

(33). When we subscribed to this course, the welcome email contained the following paragraph:

> You'll get lessons every week; sometimes only two, sometimes maybe four or five. It depends on how much time I have. The answers will be posted a few days after the lessons. In 14 days we received 12 lessons, six exercises, and six answers (see Appendix A for an extract from one of the emails that we received). Usually, the teacher sent exercises (vocabulary, reading, grammar) on one day, and on the next day sent the answers to the previous exercises. The lessons we received from English by E-mail consisted of question-and-answer language sessions: no explanation, no discussion. Initially, we wondered why Mr Mathe was offering such free service, until the emails begin to arrive, containing quite a lot of advertising (see Appendix A).

Discussion

The schools

By far the largest group in the survey were the full-blown virtual schools. They are perhaps best described in terms of the following criteria:

1. Does the school charge a fee for enrolment, or are the courses free?
2. How much teaching material does the school provide?

This is usually linked to whether the school is free or not. Some sites offer a lesson a week, or a lesson whenever the teacher feels like posting one (see the email extract below), while others provide a complex set of tasks that require students to be working online for some hours a week (see, for example, 23).

3. How much technical equipment and know-how are needed by the student?

Most do not specify equipment requirements, which presumably means that a web browser is enough. Others, however, encourage students to utilise video and audio facilities linked to their computer. The more complex the setup, the more advanced a student's computer literacy needs to be.

4.   How do the schools organise their teaching programs?

Some schools run 'terms' starting on specific days and running for a fixed number of weeks; some are continuous, offering materials whenever a student wants them; some require online attendance at specific times and on specific days.

The majority of the schools we investigated offer a 'course' of lessons followed by feedback from the teacher (8, 10, 11, 16, 17, 19, 29). Some of them offer a 'conferencing centre' which is, in essence, an email listserver that students can use either for messages to each other or for the teacher to communicate to the students (24, 26, 30). The most ambitious schools attempt to recreate the college atmosphere by offering semester-long courses and encourage students to have a video camera and an audio link to the teacher and the rest of the 'class' using Microsoft's NetMeeting software (5, 20, 22, 23, 28).

There are a surprising number of blank squares in our table — most worrying perhaps are the ones in the 'Cost' column. We found none with a formal syllabus posted on their site. One, Number 28, based its courses round a published textbook, which could be seen as a form of the syllabus. Few even attempt to indicate that they follow a particular teaching philosophy. We may have missed some of the information when we searched the sites; however, if we were capable of missing them then it is most likely that potential students will miss them too.

Enrolment levels

The level of attendance at these cyber schools is hard to gauge. Many of the schools demand an up-front payment before enrolment, and not indicate how big the classes are. Occasionally small clues betray the size of their enrolment: Compuhigh (16), for instance, claims to have a 'daily posting responding to student questions' that is freely accessible to the casual visitor. On the day we looked, there were four postings, one asked about how to enrol, one asked about how to unenrol, one asked about the content of the program, and only one had a genuine language question. Four responses to questions indicate the likelihood of a very small number of enrolments. Another cyberschool (30), which claims to have eight-week 'terms' running throughout the year, has not even bothered to post the dates of its terms beyond May 1999, probably indicating no students whatsoever. This is presumably also true of the two schools we attempted to enrol into, but which did not respond to us.

The practical problems of cyber schooling

Students face many problems that are inherent in the uses of technology for distance learning: in particular, a lack of computer literacy, and the need to maintain a sense of purpose (in other words, the need for strong motivation).

In the cyberschool arena, these problems surface as:

- The need for adequate levels of computer literacy on the part of the students. The more technologically demanding a cyber classroom becomes, the greater the number of potential students there will be who are not able to cope with the demands of the equipment. If the concept of the cyberschool is that students can work on improving their English on their own, and at whatever time they like, they must be able to operate the equipment without having to call on help each time they wish to use it. The more advanced the technology becomes, the more likely it is that cyber schooling will become the restricted domain of the 'cybergeek' — typically a young male whose main leisure-time activity is playing with and on computers. This is hardly the clientele that the cyberschool industry would wish to end up with.
- The need to maintain high levels of motivation on the part of the students. Sandery's comments quoted earlier are relevant here: 'some externally set deadlines and other structures may improve the learning outcomes for most students'. Outcomes will be enhanced if motivation can be kept high, but that is notoriously difficult for students working in isolation, especially if there are no external deadlines for them to work to or a framework that helps them gauge their progress and guide them onto the next step in their learning.
- The timing of academic terms/semesters/trimesters differs across the world, and so it is often difficult to put together an electronic class at a date and a time to suit all participants. This is difficult enough for email communications, but it is far more difficult for video-conferenced classes, as the class depends on having a group of students sitting in front of video cameras linked to computers for an hour or more at a specific time on a specific day. A significant proportion of students enrolled in any truly international web program is likely to be unavailable at a given time on a given day.

Debski & Gruba (1999) identify all three of these problems in the survey of tertiary instructor attitudes that they carried out in Melbourne.

Most of the schools examined here do attempt to cope with some of the issues

raised above: if they are unsure about the technology, students are encouraged to email for help, though they would need to be quite advanced learners before they were able to describe their problem, let alone understand the instructions on how to fix it. Some of the schools offer a range of scheduled times for their classroom activities in an attempt to cover different time zones, but this does not overcome the problem of only having a fraction of the total student numbers available for anyone class.

Motivation is an important element in any learning situation. Warschauer cites a survey that he carried out which indicates that using computers for learning is motivating in itself. He identifies three factors that bring this about:

1. computers help students fulfil their need to communicate with native speakers in other countries, with other students and with their teacher;
2. computers help students overcome isolation, and make it less threatening for them to contact people; and
3. many students think that computers can help them learn better and more independently: they feel they have more control over their learning and have more opportunities to practise English.

It should be safe to assume that if a student is enrolling in a cyberschool he or she is already motivated by these factors. However, to maintain a student's motivation to stay enrolled for any length of time, a different set of factors is required. Many of the cyber schools address this aspect of motivation by setting students attainable goals: a student is more likely to stay online for eight weeks if the class is designed to last eight weeks (and particularly if the student has paid for all eight weeks upfront),

Motivation is perhaps the hardest of all to deal with at a distance, but it is perhaps the most important of all to overcome if students and the cyberschools are to have successful outcomes.

Cyberschool: Threat or promise?

On the positive side, a common set of characteristics do appear to be evolving among the more ambitious cyberschools. These are:

● The typical school offers many specialised courses, ranging from basic English through English for Special purposes and TOEFL preparation.

- Students can work on many web pages containing embedded scripts that consist of exercises in grammar, vocabulary, and reading, and on listening comprehension exercises using RealAudio.
- For a fee, students can also submit written work by email to a teacher who will email it back with feedback on their writing.
- The school will have a chatroom where students can communicate to each other in English.
- If the school offers access to teachers that consists of more than the simple marking of assignments, the school will work within specific 'terms' that may be four or eight weeks in length, and provide students with several 'assignments' that have to be completed and submitted by email.
- The more adventurous schools will also offer 'classes' using Microsoft's NetMeeting software and student video cameras.

There is, however, a significant negative side as well, all of which currently militates against successful uptake of cyberschooling:

Lack of a human face

The industry (if it can be called that yet) has a serious image problem. Most of the sites are unwelcoming, with few graphics and only a sprinkling of images of people that would provide a human 'face' to the organisation behind the site. There is the occasional photograph of an individual teacher or principal, but otherwise, most sites consist of pages of form-like exercises to fill in and faceless emails to read. An exception to this is TestDEN: Your Personal TOEFL Trainer (29), which has a particularly lively, approachable interface.

Lack of adequate information about the schools and their courses

As we have already discussed, many of the sites offer incomplete information, and what it is often hard to find. Some (1, 2) offer little or no information until after student enrols.

Many offer a set of free exercises as a sample of what is to come once payment has been made: some offer a free week's enrolment, but none offered any kind of syllabus document that shows the student what they will be studying and when. Even the personalised instruction offered by many sites is not accompanied by examples,

which would show potential students what they can expect.

Poor marketing

As we have indicated earlier, our brief experience of cyberschools leads us to suspect that very few of these cyberschools have large enrolments. The very fact that they do not mention student numbers makes us think that enrolments must be in the tens at the most. Of course, we may be quite wrong about this — there is no way of telling. If we are wrong, then the more successful sites are doing themselves a grave disservice. In most cases, potential students are asked to send their credit card number to a website on the other side of the world with an authority to withdraw hundreds of dollars. In many cases, the authority is an ongoing one — the site is authorised to keep withdrawing the same amount regularly until told to stop. Anyone who is contemplating giving total strangers this kind of access to their money will want to know that the organisation behind the school is legitimate and reliable and that the service provided is of good quality: The best way of showing that is by telling potential customers how many students are currently enrolled and how many of these have reenrolled. Nothing boosts confidence like an appearance of success.

Further examples of poor marketing skills are the cyberschools who offer little or no information about themselves until after a potential student has sent details about himself. This seems to be a particularly unwise strategy in the highly competitive web environment.

Hidden costs

When it comes to paying for their involvement in cyberschooling, students are likely to find that there are some hidden costs. Apart from the computer and the software necessary to access the Internet and to work on written materials, there are also the costs involved in purchasing time with an Internet service provider (ISP), making the necessary phone calls to connect to the ISP (relatively cheap in Australia, but not necessarily so in other countries), and in purchasing the additional equipment recommended by the cyberschool, such as a sound card and a video camera and the associated hardware/software to go with it.

These are hidden costs that may well put cyberschooling beyond the financial reach of many in the more developed nations, and well beyond the reach of most in less developed nations. In most cases, it would be cheaper to go to a local language school than to enrol into an overseas website.

Conclusion

Our experience of cyberschools has been a rather disappointing one. The industry is still very much in its infancy, with a significant proportion of sites in existence that are little more than teachers' web pages.

The future viability of independent cyberschools very much depends on the credibility of what they offer. It could be said that the ESL/EFL industry only became viable when it began to teach towards internationally recognised standards: the Cambridge Certificate, TOEFL, and IELTS. None of the cyberschools that we investigated even pretended to offer IELTS or Cambridge training, though a number of them did offer TOEFL training. There is no reason to believe that the cyberschool industry is going to be any different from the traditional language schools of the 1960s. Until cyberschools can offer students an internationally recognised certificate that will open the door to other opportunities in their lives (typically higher education or a better job), there is little likelihood that cyberschools will be more than the poor relations of the language teaching industry.

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Appendix A

Extract from an email lesson

This an example of materials from one email lesson received from EnglishLearner.Com at

ENGLISH BY E-MAIL
a free service of EnglishLearner.Com
http://www.englishlearner.com
by Elek Mathe - elek@englishlearner.com

You are receiving this e-mail because you signed up for it - I never send unsolicited messages (spam).
Please tell a friend how to subscribe - it's free!
For unsubscription info, please see the end of this e-mail.
I'll send you the answers to this lesson on Sunday (19 September).

BOOKS FOR LEARNERS OF ENGLISH!
The best dictionaries, grammar books and vocabulary lists at DISCOUNT PRICES!
These are the books that all teachers of English recommend, all around the world!
Click here:
http://www.englishlearner.com/books

ADVANCED VOCABULARY 6
Exercise 1
Match the two halves of the proverbs in the two columns.

1) Look before A) than words.

2) There is no smoke B) always blames his tools.

3) Actions speak louder C) while the sun shines.

4) All's well D) and spoil the child.

5) A bad workmen E) is a master of none.

6) A Jack of all trades F) that lays the golden eggs.

7) Make hay G) without breaking the eggs.

8) Time and tide wait H) you leap.

9) Spare the rod I) from little acorns grow.

10) Great oaks J) without fire.

11) Don't kill the goose K) for no man.

12) You cannot make an omelet (sic) L) that ends well.

These exercises were written by Elek Mathe (elek@englishlearner.com). You can use them freely for educational purposes - business use is forbidden.

Please help this free service (it won't cost you anything) - visit:

http://www.englishlearner.com/helpsite.html

For past interactive lessons, visit the host site at

http://www.englishlearner.com/online

To subscribe, send an empty e-mail to

lessons-subscribe@mlm.englishlearner.com

To unsubscribe, send an empty e-mail to

lessons-unsubscribe@mlm.englishlearner.com

If you have any questions, contact the list owner, Elek Mathe -

elek@englishlearner.com

Appendix B

Websites discussed in the paper

This an example of materials from one email lesson received from EnglishLearner.Com at

From Dave's ESL Caf_ site
Numbering in the first part of this list (01-30) refers to the entries in the list at Dave's ESL Cafe on 1 October 1999, when the survey was carried out. Any omitted entries were not relevant to this survey.

01 English Connection - http://www.englishconnection.com/EConline/Default.htm

03 Cyberlangues - http://www.cyberlangues.com/

05 Ed USA Online - http://www.edusaonline.com/

07 English Page - Free Online English Lessons - http://www.englishpage.com/

08 English on-line reading - http://www.sfs.nju.edu.cn/test.htm

09 English Through the Internet - http://mofetsrv.macam98.ac.il/~elaine//eti/

10 English Tuition Online - English for your needs –
http://www.arborio.com/english/online.html

11 English Online - http://www.englishonline.net/

12 EnglishSpace - http://www.englishspace.ort.org/

13 Englishtown - http://www.englishtown.com/

14 Fullerton College composition online –
http://staff-www.fullcoll.edu/~lkennedy/Online.htm

15 Language Learning Forum - http://www.sfc.keio.ac.jp/~kabune27/

16 Compuhigh - http://compuhigh.com/info/

17 EuroTitle Email Course - http://www.eurotitle.freeserve.co.uk/

19 Knowledge 2000 - http://toefl.telecampus.com/

20 Web-English - http://members.aol.com/webenglis/index.htm

21 Learn2.com - http://www.Learn2.com/

22 Net English teacher - http://homes.arealcity.com/lcnet/

23 NetLearn Languages - The On-Line Language School - http://www.nll.co.uk/

24 Study English Online for Free –
http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/9260/online.html

25 Robinson's Online English - http://forums.delphi.com

26 Roggy's ESLweb - http://www.eslweb.net/

27 Sat Caliber - http://www.tescaliber.com/OpScr.asp

28 Surf2School.com - http://www.surf2school.com/english/

29 TestDEN: Your Personal TOEFL Trainer - http://www.testden.com/

30 The English Writing Academy - http://www.english-writing.co.uk/

Sites not from Dave's ESL Cafe

31 The Internet Mini-Course - http://www.public.iastate.edu/~hschmidt/minicourse.html

32 Guide to Grammar and Writing –

http://webster.commnet.edu/HP/pages/darling/grammar.htm

(This is a broken link as of June 2016).

33 English by E-mail - http://www.EnglishLearner.com

34 English for the Internet - http://www.study.com/

35 Online English - http://scuolaitalia.com/online-english/

36 Worldschool tutorials - http://.www.Worldschool.com/