Creating Effective Websites for ESL/EFL Students

By Charles Kelly
Aichi Institute of Technology (Toyota, Japan)

The detailed handout is available online.

`http://aitech.ac.jp/~ckelly/esl/design`

From a visitor's point of view, a good web site is …

- ...a web site that is usable.
- ...a web site that has something the visitor wants.
- ...a web site that doesn't waste the visitor's time.
- ...a web site that isn't irritating.

Guidelines to Consider

1. Make your site usable by everyone if possible.

- Test your pages on as many different computers using as many different browsers as you can.
- Make your pages as backward compatible as you can.
- Make your pages usable by handicapped visitors as well.

2. Make your site as fast as possible.

- Avoid things that slow down the loading of your pages such as including too many images, using CGI, SSI, PHP, and ASP for pages that can be static pages.
- Remember that what may seem acceptably fast for you on your computer may seem painfully slow on a less powerful computer or when accessed over a slow Internet connection.
- Be careful not to include too much "navigation." Some poorly-designed pages devote a higher percentage of their file size to "non-content" navigation and advertising than they use for presenting "content."
- Don't make your pages too large. Don't make your pages too small. If pages are too large, visitors must wait a long time for the pages to load in. If the pages are too small, visitors spend a lot of time clicking links and reconnecting to your server to get the next page.

3. Make your site easy to use.

- Make navigation easy. However, don't put in so much that it makes your page really slow by increasing the file size.
- Don't clutter your pages with images, too much navigation or too much "site engine optimization."
- Be careful with color choices and font sizes.
- Don't require logging in or registering to use the site.

4. Make your site useful.

- The main aim of the web site should be to provide "content," not to show off fancy web page design or to sell advertising.
- Keep your site stable. Avoid "Not Found" errors. Once a page has been uploaded, don't move it to another location or rename the file.
- Create a site that fills a need. Do something that hasn't been done yet. Instead of trying to produce a site similar to an existing site, find something that is still needed and focus on filling that need.
- Focus on one thing and do it well. It's better to have a good or great focused site than an average or below average general site. (Jack of all trades, master of none.)

5. Maintain integrity. Be professional.

- Be truthful. Be honest. Deliver what you claim to deliver.
- You will risk losing credibility if you overly "site engine optimize" your website to obtain artificially high rankings in search engine results.
- Don't use phrases like "the number one site" or "the best site." This kind of phrase sounds like an exaggeration and advertising hype.
- If yours is a commercial site, don't pretend otherwise.

- Check your facts. Check your spelling. Proofread your pages.
- If you have a collection of links, be sure your descriptions are accurate.
- Don't violate copyrights. Using copyrighted material without permission, even if credit is given, is still a copyright infringement.

6. Make your site friendly and fun to use.
- Make your pages as visually pleasing as you can without slowing them down too much.
- Always weigh "good-looking" vs. "fast-loading."
- Don't annoy your visitors.
- What annoys visitors most is probably waiting a long time for pages to download and display.
- Other irritations include crowded pages, irritating color combinations, blinking text, animated images, hard-to-read fonts, excessive use of images, too much advertising and excessive search engine optimization.

7. Use "cutting edge technology" carefully.
- Remember that even if it can sometimes be done slightly more effectively utilizing "cutting edge technology," it is often better to compromise and make a page that works for a wider audience.
- If you have pages that won't work for everyone, tell visitors what is needed.
- If your pages only work on the latest browsers, remember to put a message at the top of each page, so visitors without these browsers understand why your pages look strange or don't work properly.

8. Remember that what you think is true may not be true.
- Don't assume everyone will see your page the same way you see it.
- Be aware that some visitors won't download images.
- Be aware that font sizes and window sizes vary.
- Don't assume people will enter your site through the main page.
- Be aware that even if your server is fast, not everyone will get your pages quickly.
- Don't believe everything you read. There is a lot of misinformation or outdated information on the web and in books.
- Don't believe everything people tell you.
- Be careful when using web authoring programs. Companies rarely tell you the limitations of their products.
- Remember that what is true now may not be true in the future.
- Also, remember that what used to be true may no longer be true.

9. Should I really worry about the minority who use less powerful computers, use older browsers and have slow Internet access? - YES!
- There are many people studying English as a Foreign Language in countries with slow and/or expensive Internet connections, so it is very important for us as ESL/EFL teachers to be careful when designing web sites.
- An often heard remark is "More than 94% of my visitors are using the latest browsers, so I don't really need to write pages that work for everyone."
- Comment 1: As a teacher, you would not write things on the blackboard ignoring three blind students in your classroom of 50 students. Shouldn't we also be as considerate to our web site visitors?
- Comment 2: This "94% of my visitors" is likely to really mean that the log file shows 94 hits out of 100 that came from a current browser. If you have the type of site that gets return visitors, then it is unlikely that each "hit" is a different individual. This could easily mean that 6 people weren't able to use the page and 31 people accessed the page 3 times each which means that the minority is a lot larger than you might think.
- It is quite likely that for quite a while there will be a need for pages that work on older computers (which require using older browsers) and pages that are fine-tuned to be as fast as possible.

Sites that I Maintain or Help to Maintain
- Interesting Things for ESL Students
  - o www.manythings.org
- The Internet TESL Journal
  - o iteslj.org
- Activities for ESL Students
  - o a4esl.org

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