

Effective ESL/EFL Web Site Design

TESOL 2004 Convention, Presentation #4011, Wednesday, March 31, 2004, 7:00 PM

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

Thomas Leverett, Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, Illinois, United States of America)

Abstract

This discussion focuses on ways to make Web pages quickly and effectively, considering options and innovations available, kinds of activities possible, and problems to avoid. Opinions and questions are welcome.

What Every Web Author Should Always Keep in Mind

- Web pages do not look the same on every computer. People use different settings, fonts, font sizes, browsers and so on.
- HTML editors (Dreamweaver, FrontPage, etc.) are not perfect. They are just tools to assist you.
- The larger the file size, the slower the download will be. The aim is to have fast-downloading pages.
- If you are not careful, it is possible to create pages that are not usable by some visitors.

Making Web Pages Quickly

- Learn basic HTML. It's easier than many people think. (Search for "html tutorial" using your favorite search engine.)
- Use Netscape Composer (freeware) to create pages similar to the way you use a word processor. You can also buy commercial products that may (or may not) do a better job.
- There are places on the Web that allow you to blog for free. They are usually fast to set up and easy to use. Blogging is an easy way to get information to your students.
- Advertising-supported "free" websites often have easy-to-use templates.

Making Effective Pages

1. Make your site usable by everyone whenever possible.
Don't unnecessarily do things that limit the number of people that can benefit from your site.
2. Make your site as fast as possible.
This not only makes your site more enjoyable to use, but also allows those with expensive and/or slow Internet connections to use your site.
3. Make your site easy to use.
Make it uncluttered, easy to navigate and easy to read.
4. Make your site friendly and fun to use.
Make your site as attractive and fun as you can without making it slow.

From a visitor's point of view, a good web site is one that...

- **...is usable.**

What is usable, varies from visitor to visitor. Remember that more people will find your site usable if you use fewer "bell and whistles."

- **...has something he/she wants.**

Not only does the site need to have content that the visitor wants, but the visitor must be able to locate this content on your site.

- **...doesn't waste his/her time.**

Time has been wasted if it takes visitors a long time to find what they want on your site, if it takes a long time for the pages to download, or if the site requires excessive jumping from one page to another.

- **...isn't irritating.**

An irritating site is one that isn't 100% usable, pretends to have what you want but doesn't or wastes your time. What visitors find irritating varies, but may include such things as irrelevant use of Java or JavaScript, animated images, frames, advertising and tables that don't fit the window. When you visit a site that you find irritating, remember what was irritating and avoid doing the same thing on your own site. Also remember that what you think is "cool" and "neat" may be regarded as irritating by others.

For more details read:

Guidelines for Designing a Good Web Site for ESL Students

<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Kelly-Guidelines.html>

(This is a case-sensitive URL.)

Some Major Problems to Avoid

- My page doesn't work in some browsers.
- My page looks terrible in some browsers.
- My page loads very slowly for some users or all users.
- People don't use my page(s).

Good Advice on How to Avoid Problems

- Never assume that a page that looks good on your computer also looks good on everyone else's computer.
- Be conservative. While it is fun to experiment with possibilities, remember that many people are using computers that still may not support newer code. Write something that works on a three or four year old browser and it is quite likely that up to 100% of the people visiting your page can use it.
- Test everything on as many different browsers (old and new) and computers (old, new and different operating systems) as you can. When visiting friends, test your pages on their computers. People may have different preference settings that you have not considered. Have as many different people as you can look at your pages and send comments.

The Kinds of Things You Can Put Online

1. Put up a set of links to materials already on the Web that are appropriate for your students. You don't need to make the material, just guide your students to it.
2. Create quizzes and activities for your students to do online.
3. Put things online that you normally put on paper.
 - a. Put your syllabus online.
 - b. Put all your handouts online in addition to handing them out in the classroom.
 - c. Put last year's tests online so students know what to expect.
 - d. Put additional reference materials, vocabulary lists and supplemental homework online.
4. Set up a "discussion board" for just your own students.

Options & Innovations

- One good use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) is to only define styles for "traditional" HTML tags. If you avoid using <div> and "class" and design your page using only <h1>, <h2>, , , etc., your page's file size will not only be small but the page will also work in older browsers. A style sheet then gives you control over these HTML tags, so you can achieve a "modern" look.
- Using an external JavaScript file for your navigation menu, not only saves bandwidth on page downloads, but also allows you to easily update the menu for your whole site. (See www.manythings.org and a4esl.org for examples.)

Concerning "Web Standards"

Writing pages to work on newer browsers that meet a new set of standards is no excuse for blocking users that use older browsers. Though you will see the term "web standards," please keep in mind that the Web is currently (always?) in a transitional stage and these "standards" are not yet standard and possibly never will be since they are subject to change.

When referring to "standards-complaint" browsers, Jeffrey Zeldman, cofounder of The Web Standards Project, says that "No browser is *perfectly* standards compliant or can be."

Standards-oriented design and development need not and should not mean, "designing for the *latest* browsers only." (Page 24, *Designing with Web Standards*, May 2003)

What are "Web Standards?"

On its launch in 1998, The Web Standards Project (www.webstandards.org) relabeled key World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) recommendations "web standards," a guerrilla marketing maneuver that helped reposition accurate and complete support for these specs as a vital ingredient of any browser or Internet device." (Page 17, *Designing with Web Standards*, May 2003)

If you use **Hot Potatoes** to create quizzes and activities, remember that Version 6 creates activities that only work in newer browsers that meet this new set of standards. You can provide a service to more ESL/EFL students by using Version 5.