MULTIMEDIA REVIEW

Using English for Academic Purposes. A Guide for Students in Higher Education

Andre Gillet, 2010
<http://www.uefap.com/>

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I. INTRODUCTION

Existing criteria for the evaluation of CALL materials have been mostly designed by language teachers and CALL scholars. Not surprisingly, the components of such criteria mostly examine aspects to do with the potential that materials offer for language learning, teacher fit and learner fit (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). The components of such criteria rarely evaluate features of multimedia instructional design and visual design despite the influence that these play in shaping potential learning outcomes (Mayers, 2009). Given these limitations, the guiding criteria to evaluate the website *Using English for Academic Purposes* (UEFAP) is nurtured by studies in CALL, visual design and multimedia instructional design. Table 1 summarizes each of the components. Following Chapelle (2001) the evaluation of the UEFAP website is judgmental in nature and results from the interaction with all the sections of the website in several occasions. Given the space limitations I will touch on the relevant aspects of each criteria component.

Table 1. Criteria for website evaluation

Criteria	*Components*	*Studies*
1 Courseware conception	SLA principles Learning theories	Jamieson, Chapelle and Preiss 2005, Hubbard 2006, Susser and Robb 2004, Iwabuchi and Fotos 2004, Reeder et al. 2004
2. Courseware and multimedia instructional design	Interface Navigation Accessibility Text quality Graphics and sound	Susser and Robb 2004, Iwabuchi and Fotos 2004, Hubbard 2006, Bastiaens and Martens 2000, Lynch and Horton 2009, Graham 2008
3.Operational description	Timing/control options/ Interactivity User input Input judging Feedback Help options	Coalpert 2004, Chapelle 2001, Hubbard 2006, Reeder et al. 2004, Iwabuchi and Fotos 2004, Jamieson, Chapelle and Preiss 2005, Lynch and Horton 2009, Ruiz-Madrid 2006, Susser and Robb 2004
4. Learner fit		Chapelle 2001, Hubbard 2006, Levy and Stockwell 2006, Susser and Robb 2004, Iwabuchi and Fotos 2004
5.Potential for language learning		Chapelle 2001, Cummins, Brown and Sayers 2007, Jamieson, Chapelle and Preiss 2005, Susser and Robb 2004

II. OVERVIEW

Using *English for Academic Purposes* is a free website addressed to learners of English as a second and/or foreign language in higher education. UEFAP has been primarily maintained and updated by its creator, Dr. Andy Gillet, for over 10 years and it is supported by the British Association of Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes.

The website is designed in three frames and is made up of 11 sections: 'About', 'Accuracy', 'Assessment', 'Background', 'Links', 'Listening', 'Materials', 'Reading', 'Speaking', 'Vocabulary' and 'Writing'. Each section is made up of a number of subsections that vary according to the language component or skill it addresses. Thus, while the 'Accuracy section' is made up of four subsections, the 'Writing section' is made up of 14, as illustrated in Figure 1.
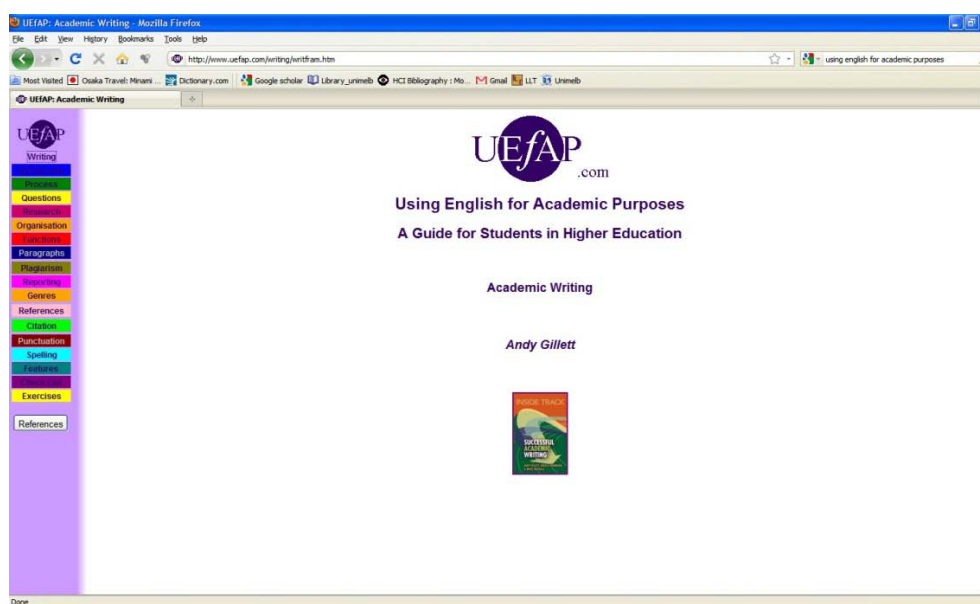
Figure 1. Subcomponents in the writing section

Most sections in UEFAP start with an introduction page where, in plain language, the author explains what learners will come across in that particular section. Sections directly concerned with language learning offer a brief overview of theories informing the skill together with exercises for practice. The exercises are mostly presented in multiple choice format, completion exercises, gap-filling exercises and cloze dictations.

III. CRITERION 1: LEARNING THEORIES AND SLA PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE CONSTRUCTION

UEFAP is a good example of tutorial CALL underpinned in behavioristic approaches to language learning with some shades of constructivism. The website can be used as a self-access resource or it can be easily integrated to a language curriculum. Learners are highly encouraged to complete the practical exercise always with a purpose in mind and this purpose is made clear in the introduction of each section. One can perceive a clear intention to help learners develop autonomy and for that the author has carefully crafted the contents in a way that learners understand the reasons why particular topics need to be addressed and how these should be developed. This is simply put one of the best features of the website.

IV. CRITERION 2: COURSEWARE AND MULTIMEDIA INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Some principles of Gestalt theory are apparent in the design of the website. For instance, the design in most pages is plain and consistent and this allows learners focus on content rather than get distracted by flashy animations. However, in some pages the selection of background color can be disturbing and not very eye-friendly.

The navigation is consistent throughout the website and it is performed through buttons displayed on the left-hand frame of each interaction page. Additionally, to help locate users in the website sections are presented in frames that use the same color of the selected button (Figure 2).
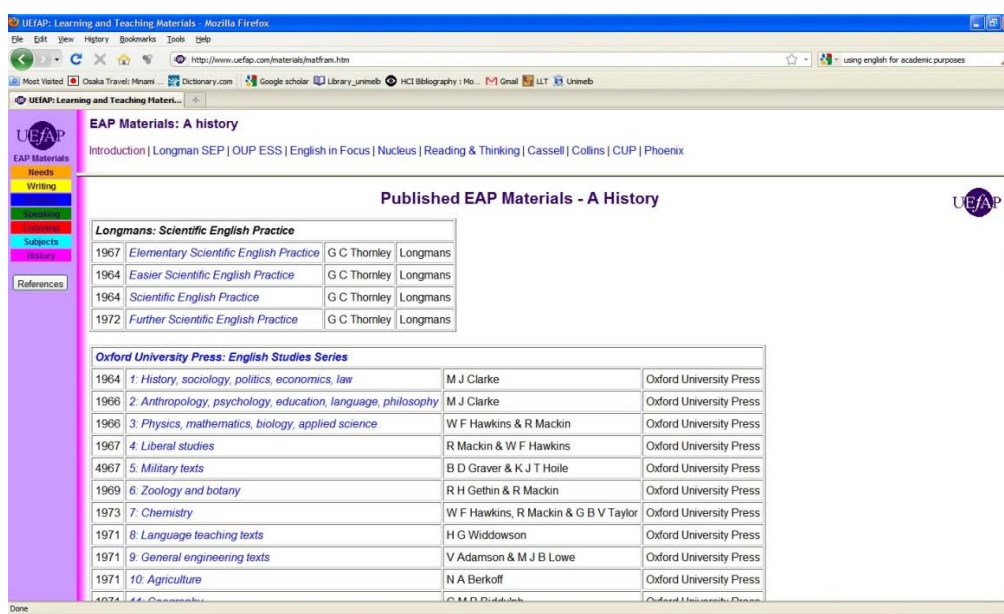

Figure 2. Frames in the website

Other principles of Gestalt theory seem to be violated. There is no intuitive grouping of individual sections. I clearly understand that sections are listed in alphabetical order, but as a language learner and instructor this type of display did not seem intuitive. I would have expected to see language skills grouped in one section, thus, having the four language skills listed one after the other and sections such as 'Materials', Links' and 'Background or References' offered as last choices.

At times, I felt stuck in some 'Exercises pages' given the lack of navigation conventions and this is partly because there are no textual directions on how to navigate the site. The

directions are given in an eight- minute video that can be only accessed through the 'About section'. Although quite informative, new generation of visual learners may find cumbersome having to spend such a long time watching the video tutorial to find out that individual pages link to the homepage through the website logo and that individual sections are not linked among them.

Accessibility issues in the website were simply overlooked. No ALT attributes (alternate text, tags in pictures) were used in the construction of the website and the design in frames makes it difficult for learners with disabilities to access it (Lynch & Horton, 2002).

Media is limited to audio files and static pictures except for the video in the introduction. Audio files are offered in different formats so they can be played in Real player, Windows Media player, Flash and Quick time. This offering of options makes the website easy to use because learners do not need to download additional plug-ins to access the materials.

V. CRITERION 3: OPERATIONAL DESCRIPTION

The feedback is corrective, but at times can be misleading. Despite I did not enter any answers in some listening and vocabulary exercises the feedback reads: "Good! You have some answers correct." Moreover, learners are unable to track results from previous exercises or get explanations for incorrect items, hence, they need to be constantly aware of their own progress if they want to focus on specific linguistic forms and expressions.

As for help, the website does not seem to fully exploit the capabilities of the computer to offer input enhancements in the form of translations, transcripts, glossed words for learners to interact with the materials. In the listening and vocabulary sections of the website, the assistance provided for learners is only performed through hints that display the first letter of the word in the answer. This means that learners who experience difficulties in understanding aural or written texts are not assisted to 'repair' those problems for task completion and text comprehension.

VI. CRITERION 4: LEARNER FIT

The language tasks presented in the website mostly resemble classroom tasks and primarily address visual learners with no much experience in multimodal environments. Also, the drill-and-practice approach of the website and the repeated open-ended and multiple-choice cloze tests may fatigue even the most motivated learners.

VII. CRITERION 5: POTENTIAL FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

The content in all the sections is relevant and comprehensive, but not up-to-date in particularly, the one in the listening section. Although the website is constantly updated, some of the references seem rather old compared to the sheer volume of research produced in the last few years. I spent some time interacting with the rhetorical functions of the language summarized in the speaking and writing sections. Each function was fully explained and key expressions that illustrate the function were provided. I found these materials quite relevant and I completely agree that even language learners at advance proficiencies would benefit from the interaction with such functions. However, the proposed exercises did not seem to capture the goal of the such functions. This in a way can be explained by the limitations of the website regarding multimodal input and the affordances of both learner-computer interaction and learner-learner interaction.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Using *English for Academic Purposes* is a valid resource of digitalized materials for the avid and self-directed language learner and for language teachers seeking to implement tutorial CALL in their lessons. However, the website does not fully exploit the capabilities of the computer to provide opportunities for learner-computer interaction, participation and collaboration, features available in current technologies.

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