

## Creating Materials Online with Free Teacher Tools

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### Introduction

There is no doubt that nowadays the Internet is being used in many ways for teaching and learning. According to Felix (2000), its impact in language teaching has been considerable because the technology of the Web "has advantages over the previous generation of CALL by being cheaper and easier to develop and often cheaper and easier to run and by offering real possibilities for authentic interaction". If we analyse the current use of the Internet, we will see that it has mainly been utilised as a source of information and communication, but it is also being used more and more as a source of instrumental tools. This article focuses on this utility of the Internet. Some sites are presented where teachers can easily design activities and exercises online, such as quizzes, tests, puzzles or surveys, which require no advanced computer skills. Included are only those tools that are free for educational use for obvious reasons. However, it is worth pointing out that there are also commercial authoring tools that are similar in many ways to the ones presented in this article.

As will be seen in the article, we can make use of teacher tools to manage a classroom or to prepare activities that can be carried out either online or offline, depending on technical resources and student groups. From a practical perspective, these tools can be divided into three categories:

1. Educational environments or platforms like, for instance, Nicenet, <http://www.nicenet.org/>. We can use these platforms to administer an online course by using several tools and utilities, such as a forum, a content manager, etc.
2. Authoring software packages: This kind of software has to be downloaded onto your computer and the exercises are prepared offline. Then, they can

either be uploaded to a server on the Web (if you have a web site) or used offline on an intranet server or on one or several independent computers in a classroom. Hot Potatoes is probably the most popular authoring software among language teachers. It is available free for educational non-profitable use at <http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked/>.

3. Online authoring templates and designing tools: These allow teachers to create activities online, normally by filling a template with the data that we want to include in the exercise or activity. When the activity is finished, we can sometimes leave it on the web or save and use it offline. This kind of tool will be the focus of this article, and some of them will be examined in detail later.

Educational Platforms are not widely used, except in higher education, but authoring tools are very popular at all educational levels. From a pedagogical point of view, the main advantage of designing materials with authoring tools, in contrast with closed software, is that the teacher inputs the content that best suits the students. Consequently, the exercises are more meaningful for them, and mixed ability is also better addressed. There are other benefits to using authoring tools. For instance, they usually allow teachers to create interactive exercises and introduce multimedia elements, such as sounds and images; and they promote autonomy as they frequently serve as self-evaluation tools.

#### Free Online Authoring Tools

Within the last category of teacher tools mentioned above, I provide here an example of the possibilities of what can be done with one of these tools. I wanted to know what my students' opinion about a current topic was. I could have typed a document and handed them out a photocopy. Then, I would have analysed the answers and discussed the results with them in the next class. A different way of doing this kind of survey is by means of an interactive tool on the Internet. I was aware of web sites where a survey can easily be created and left online for students. So, I prepared the survey online the previous evening, and asked my students to answer it online in the morning. This way, I was able to see the statistical results immediately after they had finished answering the survey, and we could discuss them in that session. This is a useful web-based tool if you have the possibility of using Internet in a computer classroom. But, in other cases, you can create the activities online and save them in a floppy to be done offline afterwards. This way there is no need to be online to carry out the exercises with the students; what you normally need are

computers that have a standard browser, such as Explorer or Netscape. Thus, it is not necessary to have an Internet connection in the classroom to take advantage of many of the authoring tools on the Web.

Most of the sites that offer online authoring tools share the following characteristics:

- On many of these sites, there is more than one type of template available: puzzles, quizzes, worksheets, lesson plans, surveys, etc.
  - All of them allow the teacher to create activities while online. Besides, on some of these sites, you can edit and modify the exercise again later.
  - They usually guide you through the process step by step by giving clear instructions.
- From a practical point of view, when you think of using one of these tools and decide which one is more suitable for your needs, you should take into consideration four important aspects:

1. The format of the activity. That is, the way in which the activity or exercise is presented once it has been created. The output could be as follows:
  - A non-interactive document in html format to be printed (e.g. crosswords, worksheets, etc.).
  - An interactive exercise in an html format to be opened and done on a browser (e.g. quizzes, surveys, etc.) online or offline.
  - Other formats to be opened with a word processor or an image viewer (e.g. doc, gif, etc.).
2. The place where the activity would be stored. There are two possibilities:
  - The activity can be saved and stored on the web site where it has been created. Therefore, the students have to visit the site to do the exercises while online.
  - The activity has to be saved on the user's computer or on a floppy disk and run locally. Of course, in this case the exercises can be done offline.

There are sites that provide both possibilities; this also means that the exercises can be done online and offline, as we will see in some of the specific sites analysed in this article.

3. The type of activities and exercises that we can create. Below there is a list of activities that are usually authored on the Web. These activities are not new to

English teachers, except for the use of technological resources to create and implement them:

- Filling the gap exercises.
  - Lesson plans.
  - Lists of links or vocabulary.
  - Matching exercises.
  - Multiple Choice and Short Answer Quizzes.
  - Memory games.
  - Worksheets.
  - Surveys.
4. The conditions of access and use: all the sites that we will examine allow free use of the tools, but they may require users to register in order to know who is making use of the tool and the institutions they work in. Sometimes, these sites may provide the possibility of using more sophisticated tools if you pay for this service.

#### **Some Examples of Free Online Authoring Tools**

Now that we seen free teacher tools on the Web in general and analysed the main features of free web-based authoring tools, I present here some of the sites in detail. The four aspects explained above will aid in this presentation.

#### **Zoomerang <http://www.zoomerang.com/>**

This site provides online survey software for educators, as well as for businesses.

1. It allows you to design interactive questionnaires in html format.
2. The survey is stored and administered in the server of zoomerang. Students have to visit this site to do it.
3. It may include different kind of questions: short answer, multiple choice, open answer, etc.
4. You have to register, but it is free unless you want to use the upgrade feature program.

#### **Discovery Channel <http://school.discovery.com/teachers/index.html>**

This is an education portal with a lot of resources for teachers, students and parents.

From a teacher's perspective:

1. It is possible to create interactive exercises in html format, as well as non-interactive, worksheets, crosswords and puzzles that can be printed.
2. You can open a custom classroom account to store all the materials that you create. Therefore, your students have access to your lessons and interactive exercises online.
1. It offers a variety of activities that can be linked together. For instance, you can create a lesson plan and link it to your puzzles, worksheets or quizzes.
2. To have an account classroom you need to register; but it is free. Printable puzzles and worksheets can be designed without registering. Of course, in that case you will not be able to save them on their web site.

**Headline Makers** <http://lang.swarthmore.edu/makers/index.htm>

In contrast to the previous sites, this one is not a portal or a business tool. It is simpler, but it offers many online authoring templates for teachers.

1. This is a good example of an authoring tool web site that allows you to create interactive exercises that can be done online and offline.
2. The activities can be stored on the site, but it is advisable to save and run them from your own online server or offline in your computer classroom because, once the exercises are stored, they can be modified by anyone that enters the site.
3. It offers all sort of exercises: matching exercises, multiple choice and short answer quizzes, glossaries, drag and drop exercises, etc.
4. No registration is required.

**Trackstar** <http://trackstar.hprtec.org/>

This is part of an online educational site called 4Teachers. This space provides many more tools and resources, but, unlike Discovery Channel, this is an institutional site sustained by a project at the University of Kansas. We have chosen this tool, Trackstar, because it gives us the opportunity to create a new kind of activity that is very appropriate for a web environment.

1. The output is an html page of links.
2. The track is stored online in the web site server. Then, it can be edited and modified online. Students access the page online.
3. It creates an annotated list of links that can be used to guide students in search of information for a lesson, a treasure hunt or other similar activities.

4. Registration required (simple to do and free)

**ClozeMaker:** <http://www.edict.com.hk/clozemaker/>

This is a good example of many free and simple authoring templates available on the Web especially designed for language teachers.

1. It helps create interactive exercises in html format.
2. The activities must be saved and run offline or from your own online server.
3. You create a fill the gaps exercise. An added feature is that you can insert your own text and gaps or you can choose a text and/or a word list of grammatical items from a database on the site
4. No registration is needed.

To see examples of all the activities presented in this article you can visit the following web page: <http://www.isabelperez.com/tesol.htm>

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to introduce you to free teacher tools on the Internet and to describe a few good sites that may illustrate the variety of tools available on the Web. Language teachers have always authored their own activities for their particular students. We used to create them with the help of a typewriter, scissors and glue. Now, new technologies offer us new authoring tools to do the same job, but the result is more interactive and dynamic, which, in many ways, helps to motivate both teachers and students.

### **References**

Felix, U. 2000 "The Impact of the Web on CALL:" available online - <http://www-personal.monash.edu.au/~ufelix/finalWebCall.htm>