Reddit: Leveraging the front page of the internet as an English learning tool

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> "…the question for teachers is not simply 'what is effective' but rather 'what is appropriate for these [students] under these circumstances.'"
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> Biesta (2007, p. 16)

Introduction

It may seem bold to say that our students may actually know better than us, their teachers, as to what is appropriate for them to learn, but on occasion this has been our experience teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at an English Medium Instruction (EMI) university. In the EMI context students' academic content courses are delivered in English. Non-native English speaking students often struggle to comprehend the academic discipline-specific vocabulary. While we as EAP teachers may know very little regarding academic jargon relating to machine learning algorithms or neutrino physics, our students look to us for support. How can we determine what is appropriate for our students when we know so little about their disciplines? In this article we briefly describe how a free online resource, Reddit (www.reddit.com), can be utilized as a supplemental tool to empower learners to become agents of their own language learning. We begin by describing what Reddit is and how it could be utilized as a language learning tool. We then highlight some of the potential benefits and drawbacks of leveraging Reddit, as well as offer suggestions on how to best make use of Reddit for the English language classroom. While we understand that many readers may not be teaching EAP in an EMI context, we strongly feel that Reddit is a useful tool that can be easily adapted for use in a diverse array of language learning contexts.

What is Reddit?

Reddit is the 19th most popular website in the world (The Top 500 Sites on the Web, 2019), advertising itself as the 'front page of the internet'. In essence, Reddit is a global community message board and forum. Within Reddit are subreddits, which are subsections that have a specific focus. All posts on Reddit's front page originate in one of these subreddits, with the most popular ones being able to rank on the front page. Currently, there are over 1,100,000 subreddits, with focuses ranging from general interest such as politics, entertainment, and sports, to specific interests such as how to prepare for a Ph.D. viva, pictures of cats, and rating people's beards.

Reddit works by users submitting links to other websites or posts they made themselves. Reddit users have the option to upvote or downvote the link based on if they like the post or not. The post's prominence on the website is based on this voting system and the amount of time that has passed since it was first posted. Importantly, users can comment on both the posts submitted and each other's comments within the initial post.

Potential Benefits of Using Reddit as a Language Learning Tool

From conducting action research in our own language classrooms on using Reddit as a supplemental language learning tool, we found Reddit to be beneficial in three ways: increasing learner autonomy, exposing learners to authentic English, and helping learners to navigate websites in English.

As Reddit contains over 1,100,000 subreddits, English Language Learners can read and contribute to discussions relating to nearly any topic they can think of. Reddit therefore provides students with an opportunity to learn about what they find interesting. The subreddit 'architecture', for example, has over 212,000 subscribers, who, in the past 24 hours of writing this sentence, have had been holding discussions on Art Deco, favorite architecture books, architecture related games, architecture internships, and photographs and videos of buildings of different architectural styles. As EAP teachers of students from a diverse array of majors, our teaching tends to focus on writing skills that can be applied to students irrespective of their major, such as writing a cohesive and coherent argument. Reddit supplements our teaching in the classroom by providing opportunities for

students to be exposed to vocabulary and topics that are discipline specific, topics that we as their teachers may know very little about, such as what kinds of architecture internships exist, the Art Deco architecture style, or the best books for learning about Gothic architecture. Reddit serves as a springboard to other resources available on the World Wide Web that both teachers and students are otherwise unaware of. From our own action research we found that many students discovered websites, journals, and associations because of links to those resources that Reddit users posted in the subreddit that the students were reading. We also found that students became more confident and comfortable in navigating websites that are entirely in English.

Potential Drawbacks of Using Reddit as a Language Learning Tool

Reddit, as a condensed version of the internet, is an organic and ever changing website that can be compared to a city with different neighborhoods. Some areas of the city are family friendly and welcoming, while others are less welcoming. Depending what neighborhoods Reddit students visit, they may be exposed to things that could be considered inappropriate for the classroom. This could range from strong language to inappropriate images or content. Therefore, it is suggested that if Reddit is used as an English language learning tool, that the maturity and age of students is first taken into consideration.

Suggestions

Based on action research we have conducted, we suggest that Reddit can be a beneficial digital resource that supplements English language learning outside the classroom by exposing students to vocabulary and websites in English that relate to their specific disciplines or personal interests. We strongly encourage teachers to first familiarize themselves with Reddit's user interface, and provide some basic training as to how to sign up for the website, navigate pages of the website, find subreddits, make posts, make comments, and upvote/downvote other users posts and comments.

We also suggest that teachers have students keep a simple journal where they record what subreddits they visited, what vocabulary they found interesting to learn, and what websites or resources they found that may help them with learn-

ing English that relates to their educational and personal interests. When we used Reddit and language journals with our students we were surprised by the academic, subject-specific vocabulary they recorded, as well as the diverse array of useful websites students discovered.

A final suggestion is that Reddit could be used as a private forum. It is possible for teachers or students to set up their own subreddit and lock it to invited members only. Although the content in this particular subreddit would be entirely limited to what the students or teacher submit.

These are merely a few potential ways of leveraging Reddit as a supplemental resource for learning English. Given the scale and potential of the website, teachers are encouraged to consider the needs and context of their own students, and decide accordingly how to best make use of Reddit.

Conclusion

While the maturity of students needs to be considered, Reddit is potentially a vast, hitherto seemingly untapped resource for language teachers and students. It is full of engaging material that could potentially serve as authentic input for students and it also increases learner autonomy and helps students to become more capable in navigating English websites, a skill that is becoming essential in today's world. Deciding what is effective and what is appropriate for our students can be challenging, given the different personalities, preferred learning styles, strengths, and weakness of our students. Perhaps Reddit's greatest value then is that it puts students in the driver's seat where they decide what is effective and appropriate, thereby allowing them to decide where they want to go on their English language learning journey.

References

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About the Reviewers

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