

An Introduction of the Website *startwithears.edu.vn*

Nguyễn Phương Chi, Univerisy of Economics, HCM City
Kiều Huyền Trâm, Univerisy of Economics, HCM City

Abstract

*Having observed our business English students at the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH) struggle with their English language comprehension skills, our research team decided to create a task-related website, **startwithears.edu.vn**, to supplement the business English curriculum. The website was created to help students review and consolidate vocabulary learned in class, improve word recognition through dictation, gap-filling and mistake-correcting tasks, and provide a variety of audio recorded tasks.*

*It took us approximately one year to complete **startwithears.edu.vn** and the website was used by 202 students from five Pre-intermediate business English classes at the University of Economics in their second semester this year (2018).*

Although there were time restraints and technical errors, it was found that the website served as an effective language learning tool, with an emphasis on vocabulary learning and listening comprehension. In the future, we hope to improve the website and expand the contents to further meet the needs of UEH students who are using the Market Leader course books.

Key words: *startwithears.edu.vn*, Market Leader, listening, business English

Introduction

According to Chapelle (2001), anyone who is interested in foreign language teaching in the 21st century can definitely realize that media tools and computer-based tools are of the greatest help in foreign language acquisition. Consequently, learners are encouraged to develop their independent study skills and manage their own learning schedule. In regards to the teaching of English in Vietnam, the application of information technology has gradually become an important research subject, particularly in tertiary education. In reality, students learning English in Vietnam have been struggling due to minimal exposure to “real English” (English for real communication). Therefore, the use of information technology can be considered a bridge in helping students access the target language.

At UEH, the Market Leader Business English textbooks are selected for the first three semesters (Elementary and Pre-intermediate levels). Interestingly enough, the Market Leader series integrates the four skills based on the communicative teaching approach; whereas most UEH students, in high school, studied general English based on the Grammar-Translation approach. Therefore, UEH students are running into a language learning roadblock, so to speak, due to an outdated traditional learning approach. There is no wonder, then, why the majority of business English students claim to be confused when it comes to business English vocabulary and communicative skills (speaking and listening skills). Additionally, due to only five hours of class time per week, and over 40 students per class, UEH students are clearly struggling. Undoubtedly, one could say that UEH students are suffering from a language learning deficiency. Hence, taking into consideration the limitations set forth, a few important questions must be raised.

- How can we help our students to better review what they have learned in class?
- How can we encourage our students to work on their English language skills outside of class?
- How can we help our students improve their listening skills, which most of them admit to being their weakest skill?

It is those questions stated above that motivated our research team to develop *startwithears.edu.vn*, a website that prioritizes listening skills, consolidates the target business English vocabulary, and encourages the user to practice their English speaking.

Theoretical Background

Materials Development

A Brief Overview of Material Development

Language teaching is thought to include the five following components: students, teachers, materials, teaching methods and evaluation. Nunan (1992) claims that teaching materials were often the most substantial and observable component of pedagogy. In general, teachers tend to use their textbook as the only source of all guidance. However, actually a textbook seems impossible to meet the variety of contexts and conditions in a language class (Ur, 1996; Richards, 2003). Therefore, sometimes teachers have to make use of teaching materials outside textbooks or modify the contents of their textbook so that the learning materials could be more relevant and suitable to the demands and levels of particular groups of students. According to Tomlinson (2011), materials development

means any materials done by writers, teachers or learners in order to provide sources of language input in ways that the likelihood of intake could be maximized.

Principles in Developing Materials

Tomlinson (2011:8-23) suggests some basic principles in conducting materials development for the language teaching:

- Materials should achieve impacts, help learners to feel at ease and to develop confidence.
- What is being taught should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful?
- Materials should require and facilitate learner self-investment, provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes.
- Materials should take into account that positive effects of instruction are usually delayed, and that learners have different learning styles and differ in affective attitudes.
- Materials should permit a silent period at the beginning of instruction, should not rely too much on controlled practice and should provide opportunities for outcome feedback.

In addition, Richards and Renandya (2002:84-87) points out some criteria of effective materials:

- Language is functional and must be contextualized,
- Language development requires learner engagement in purposeful use of language,
- The language used should be realistic and authentic,
- Classroom materials will usually seek to include an audiovisual component,
- Learners need to develop the ability to deal with written as well as spoken genres,
- Effective teaching materials foster learner autonomy,
- Materials need to be flexible enough to cater to individual and contextual differences, and
- Learning needs to engage learners both affectively and cognitively.

Web-based Language Learning (WBLL)

Definition of WBLL

WBLL is a version of Web-based learning (WBL) in the language learning environment. Alessi and Trollip (2001) defines WBLL as learning that uses the World Wide Web or the Internet as a means and a method for delivery for learning and instruction. Khan (cited in Allen, 2005:5) defines WBLL as "a hypermedia-based educational program which utilizes the attributes and resources of the World Wide Web to create a meaningful learning environment where learning is fostered and supported." And, Clark (cited in Allen, 2005:5) defines WBLL as "individualized instruction delivered over public or private computer networks and displayed by a Web browser." Unquestionably, the common thread shared by all the above definitions is that WBLL uses the internet or the World Wide Web. Therefore, as quoted by Son (2007), WBLL is the trend of language acquisition that engages the use of the Web and benefits from materials, resources and applications on the Web.

WBLL Material Designing

In terms of designing web-based tasks, Hamamorad (2016:5) suggests the following techniques:

- Giving clear instructions for them to tackle web-based tasks.
- Making the content easy to navigate and download for instance, easy downloadable audio materials so that learners can repeatedly listen to them after completion of tasks.
- Using written, and recorded anecdotes and drawn pictures which are related to the materials and topics of the tasks. This helps learners understand the target culture.
- Guiding learners through the function and content of the website by catering web links with explanations.
- Providing various topics and different levels of difficulty, so as to meet learners different interests and needs.

Hamamorad (2016:5) also summarizes the procedure for designing WBLL material which was employed when the team designed tasks on *startwithears.edu.vn*.

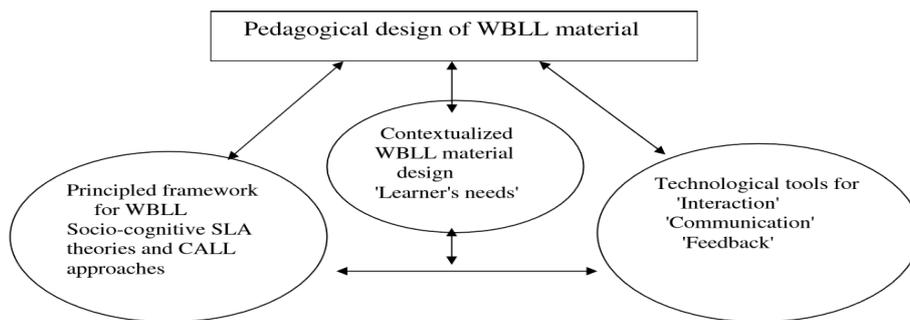


Figure 1: Figure Indicating Relation among Learner Needs, SLA and CALL
(Hamamorad, 2016)

An Overview of the Website *startwithears.edu.vn*

startwithears.edu.vn is part of an ongoing project developed by a team of EFL teachers at the University of Economics , Ho Chi Minh City (UEH), in collaboration with a computer programming technician. The project was created to enhance the business English core curriculum at the university. As it is stated in the ‘About us’ section of the website, “Having seen our students struggling during their business English courses (Market Leader textbook series), we decided to design an instructional website that would help supplement the business English lessons.” Though we realize *startwithears.edu.vn* has some drawbacks, we are confident that the website can positively contribute to the strengthening of our students’ English competence, especially, their listening skills.

Fundamental Strategies in Designing Tasks

The tasks on the website are designed based on the following strategies:

Listening is the Key

Out of the four skills, UEH students find listening to be the most difficult. Over the years, they have frequently complained about their struggle with listening skills and have repeatedly asked for further listening-based exercises to be added to the overall business English curriculum. This was further validated by a survey that was taken in September of 2017. In that survey, 236 first-year business English students were asked what language skill they found the most difficult. The results of the survey were quite convincing as 98% of the students felt that listening was the most difficult language skill to grasp. Ultimately then, the subsequent birth of *startwithears.edu.vn* became a direct response to the fulfillment of a specific need. Subsequently, in order to foster the improvement of our students, *startwithears.edu.vn* placed a predominant emphasis on listening skill development. Even in crossword puzzle tasks, written clues that the learner certainly finds in most puzzles, are replaced with spoken ones.

Being Grounded on Bottom-up Listening Approach

In real life listening, the instructor uses a combination of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ listening strategies, and, depending on the reason for listening, he/she may put emphasis on one or the other. Top-down strategies focus on the gist or the general meaning of a listening text. In these strategies, our perceptions of a particular topic and our expectations of what we might hear contribute to our comprehension. On the other hand, bottom-up strategies are detail-oriented where the listeners have to decode the combination of sounds, words and grammar to assimilate meaning.

In regards to current EFL listening materials, bottom-up listening processes seem to be neglected discouraging a great number of EFL students whose vocabulary and language competence, in general, are weak. That is because even though they do understand the context, with very few understandable words from listening resources, they are unable to grasp the main ideas and easily get lost. Therefore, *startwithears.edu.vn* focuses on helping learners understand enough linguistics elements of what they hear, familiarize them with sound form of target vocabulary and recognize known words in the stream of fast connected speech.

Utilizing Dictation

Most language instructors would argue that dictation is a useless and out-of-date method. However, this technique actually can enable learners to improve their language proficiency effectively. The developers of *startwithears.edu.vn* strongly advocate the utilization of ‘dictation’ and consider it to be a “legendary method” that can boost listening comprehension. The tasks ‘Listen and type’ and ‘Listen and complete the extract’, which appear quite frequently on the website, clearly exploit the effectiveness of dictation.

Applying Random Question Display Order

A unique feature of the website regards the sequencing of the ‘pop up questions’. Instead of an order that consecutively repeats itself, the order of the ‘pop up questions’ is random - one that constantly changes. With a repetitive consecutive sequence, students can easily remember the answers. A random question display allows for further practice until all of the questions can be confidently answered.

Implementation Process

The implementation can be illustrated by the following project summary:

Table: *startwithears.edu.vn* Project Summary

Work package	Activity list	Time
<i>Brainstorming & Selection</i>	<i>Carry out a survey questionnaire, Propose ideas; Selection of ideas for development</i>	<i>September, 2017 – 30 October, 2017</i>
<i>Designing tasks for the website</i>	<i>Website formatting, Design questions; Trim & split available audio files into smaller segments used for particular tasks; Book a digital recording studio; Hire a native English actor/teacher to read aloud specific text.</i>	<i>30 October 2017 – 30 November, 2017</i>
<i>Website Design</i>	<i>Hire a computer programmer; Purchase the website's domain and web hosting; Weekly team meetings to clarify overall tasks and design</i>	<i>30 October, 2017 – 15 December, 2017</i>
<i>Data uploading</i>	<i>Upload texts, images and audio files on the admin page of <i>startwithears.edu.vn</i>; Write & edit introductions and instructions</i>	<i>16 December, 2017 – 23 December, 2017</i>
<i>Website testing</i>	<i>Examine the website in terms of functionality, usability, interface, dataface and compatibility (The team of EFL teachers and a focus group of 3 students); Repair technical errors (The computer programmer); Edit content (The team of EFL teachers)</i>	<i>23 December, 2017 – 30 December, 2017</i>
<i>Using the website for the research</i>	<i>Teach business English students to use the website; Support them during the semester; Collect student feedback; Correct errors based on student feedback</i>	<i>2 January, 2018 – 15 June, 2018</i>
<i>Upgrading the website</i>	<i>Upgrade contents (for the 1st, 3rd and 4th modules, Market Leader program), tools and functions of the website</i>	<i>If plausible</i>

Description of *startwithears.edu.vn*

The Navigation Menu

The navigation menu includes seven links: Home; About Us; Location; Our Mission; Contact Us; Register; Login.



Image 1: Screenshot from *startwithears.edu.vn*

Content Links

There are three content links on the Home Page:

1. Listen and Learn
2. Picture Glossary
3. Extras

Listen and Learn

This section is divided into five units from the Market Leader Series (Unit 1: Careers; Unit 2: Companies; Unit 3: Selling; Unit 4: Great Ideas; Unit 5: Stress)

Each unit is linked to 3 types of activity tasks. The activity tasks include:

- Listen and Review Vocabulary
- Focus on Listening
- Listen and Respond which target to improve students' vocabulary, listening skills and speaking skills respectively.

The Activity Task sub-links include:



Image 2: Screenshot from *startwithears.edu.vn*

Listen & Learn Objectives include:

- Review vocabulary introduced in class.
- Improve word recognition through dictation, gap-filling, and mistake-correcting tasks.
- Record and listen to spoken responses.

Picture Glossary

Each unit features 10 illustrations which correspond to key target vocabulary or phrases. When users click on an illustration, they activate a written and spoken response. Associative learning is an effective instructional tool to teach vocabulary as visual associations become embedded in a learner's memory bank.

Picture Glossary Objectives:

- To review targeted vocabulary and phrases through the use of visual associations.
- To test the knowledge of students in regards to specific business words



Image 3: Screenshot from *startwithears.edu.vn*

Extras

Users can find hyperlinks to other reputable language learning websites in this section.

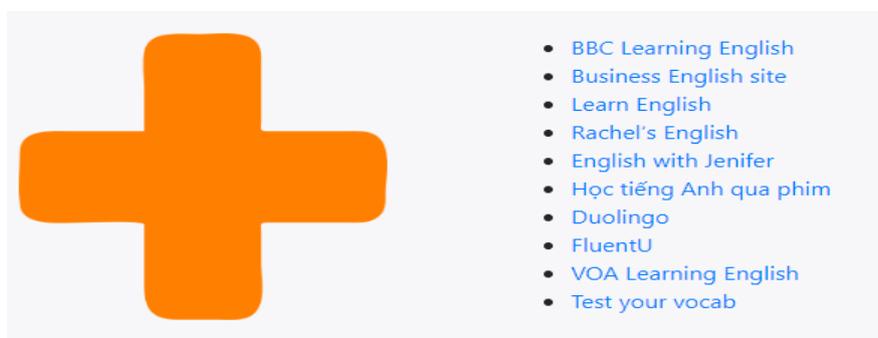


Image 4: Screenshot from *startwithears.edu.vn*

Conclusion

We are confident that *startwithears.edu.vn* can successfully be used as a supplementary resource in conjunction with a business English program that uses the Market Leader course books. Upon the completion of the 12-week semester, we received a lot of positive feedback from the students who had used the website outside of the class. Quite a few enthusiastically noted a significant improvement in their English vocabulary and their listening skills. Besides, it should be noticed that in response to the students' feedbacks, all of the informed technical errors have been corrected.

In closing, this project has been challenging on a number of different levels and a profound learning experience. It is our sincere intention to continue with *startwithears.edu.vn* in the

future. We anticipate that with available funding, we will be able to upgrade the website, and have the opportunity to hire a diverse team of 3 – 4 native English speakers for the listening tasks. We would also put more emphasis on the improvement of speaking skills. And last of all, we propose to create a series of instruments that would specifically test the impact of the website on the students' listening skills, vocabulary and speaking skills.

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