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Critical Analysis of a Website: A Critique Based on Critical Applied Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

E-learning was easily found through browsing internet, which was mostly free of charge and provided various learning materials. Spellingcity.com was one of e-learning websites for teaching and learning English to learn spelling, vocabulary and writing, which offered various games and activities for young learners, 6 until 8 year old learners in particular. The content of the websites was sufficient for beginners of English, particularly, it challenged learners' creativity to develop their own task to test their vocabulary. Further, the learning materials provided were at the right level for elementary class, in which the degree of difficulties varied from easy to difficult. However, there were some constraints needed to be considered, i.e., learners' age, appropriateness of the learning materials for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, Indonesian learners in particular. Having considered those constraints, this paper aimed to analyse the website from two different views: (1) critical applied linguistics (CAL) aspects and (2) critical discourse analysis (CDA). After analysing the website using CAL and CDA, it was found that the website was adequate for beginner, in which it provided fun learning through games as well as challenged learners' to test their vocabulary. Despite of these strengths, there were several issues required further thinking in terms of learners' broad knowledge, such as, some of learning materials focused on states in America. It was quite difficult for EFL learners if they did not have adequate general knowledge. Thus, the findings implied that the website could be used as a supporting learning material, which accompanied textbooks and vocabulary exercise books.

Keywords: *learning materials, e-learning, elementary level, critical applied linguistics, critical discourse analysis*

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Overview of the Website

English had become an important subject at school and learning media were required to support English learning, particularly young learners. Modern era had also influenced the technology and internet to help people browse news, stories, and learning materials. There were some media had been used for English language teaching (ELT), which varied from skills-focused, genre-focused, and language aspects-focused. In the modern era, technology had been growing and the use of internet had increased rapidly. This fast development led to the birth of software packages and e-learning websites for teaching and learning a target language, such as English. Therefore, software packages and e-learning websites had widely known for assisting learners. Due to the development of learning media, computer proficiency of learners was also required. Since *spellingcity.com* was intended for elementary level, it definitely challenged a teacher to enhance his learners' English language knowledge through educational games.

The website itself was designed for teaching an English course at a private educational institution in Indonesia. The learners were young EFL learners, aged 6 until 8 years old, which meant they were first until second graders of primary schools. These learners would learn English as a supplementary course as they already had learnt English at school. This statement was supported by Indonesian National Curriculum (2006) that English was a local content subject, which was taught as early as primary school's age. Generally, the website taught a wide range of spelling and vocabulary games and it was also valuable for teaching reading and writing. *Learning by doing* and *Communicative Language Teaching* were employed as the teaching approaches. These teaching methods could be seen through activities, which focused on games. It was expected that through playing the games children were learning the language. The games were *crossword*, *speedy speller*, *letter fall*, *match it*, *alphabetize*, *hang mouse*, *word search*, *unscramble*, *audio word match*, *which word*, *sentence unscramble*, and *missing letter*. Also, there are two writing activities provided for learners who would continue to the third grade, sentence writing and paragraph writing practices.

Further, the tools available in the website were also good and beneficial, in which they provided forum for discussion, and *spellingcity* links to other useful resources such as homeschooling curriculum, afterschool study, and teaching writing. Importantly, this website was not only for learners but also for teachers and parents. The website encouraged teachers and parents to monitor learners' progress as well as communication between teachers and parents. Finally, each of activity gave scores and feedback of how a learner should improve his performance. Achievement was also recognised by allowing learners to print out their certificate.

Critical Applied linguistic

Scope and coverage, relation between theory and practice (praxis), being critical, micro and macro relations, critical social inquiry, critical theory, problematising givens, self-reflexive and preferred futures were keywords of critical applied linguistics used to analyse *spellingcity.com* (Pennycook, 2001). These keywords would review the website from applied linguistics' point of view, particularly applied linguistics theories and practice as well political, social, and cultural aspects embedded in the website's learning materials. In addition, it also analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the website as well as how it would be used for future reference.

Scope and coverage of the website was limited to English orthography system, simple vocabulary, and simple sentences. They were sufficient to accommodate elementary EFL or ESL learners as most of the words (vocabulary) in the website had been taught at school. In other words, teaching the vocabulary was merely for reinforcement.

Despite learning vocabulary and its spelling as reinforcement, there was a limitation found in the website, in which, only one word was accepted for testing one's vocabulary knowledge. For example, when a learner typed *chair*, it would be fine and the test could be run. On the contrary, when two words were entered, for instance, *to eat*, the website rejected the loading process. Thus, the scope and coverage of the website was very much limited to elementary level because of the restriction mentioned previously.

Relation between theory and practice (praxis) was strong, in which games as the teaching technique were employed. The use of games here underpinned *learning by doing*, which was one of teaching methods to stimulate young learners (children) to learn a language by getting involved in the activities. For example, a child chose five words in the menu and he clicked *play a game*, which then he decided to play crossword game. It encouraged not only learner's autonomy or independent study but also knowledge and enjoyable learning activities. This method was strengthened by the facts that there were 12 games and 2 activities could be played by learners in the website. It meant that learners were able to select types of games and activities they preferred to do. The teacher was the monitor to ensure

they were learning. In addition, teachers could also be a trainer if learners had technical problems or inquiries of how to use the website.

Furthermore, spelling was also teaching the English vocabulary, which was one of features in grammatical competence of *Communicative Language Teaching* (Savignon, 1997). One of the topics was *cold*, where a set of words associated with cold or feeling cold was given, for instance, ice and rain. Another example was *unscramble game*, in which learners have to form random letters into a word. Besides that, discourse competence was also taught through writing activity, in which learners have to rewrite jumbled words into a sentence. Activities like sentence writing and paragraph writing were provided to enhance learners' discourse competence, for example, learners wrote a paragraph about the States in the USA.

Being critical in the *spellingcity.com* could be seen through some topics which represented social values. Although topics in the website were limited, they very much covered socio-cultural values of learners' background. Topics like *number to tens* and *colors* were very general and easy to understand as any learners from any countries or nations, such as Indonesians, had similar concepts of those topics.

Among all the topics, *seasons* was the only topic which might not be comprehended by learners as not all countries in the world experienced four seasons in a year like USA. Indonesia, in particular, only had two seasons in a year, *i.e.*, dry and rainy seasons. Therefore, Indonesian children would get difficulties to understand it.

Despite of children's difficulties, this topic was essential to broaden knowledge and understand other countries and their culture. The topic should be used in the classroom to underline cultural differences amongst countries in the world.

Micro and macro relations of the website could be analysed through context related to Indonesia political ideology and its social situation (Pennycook, 2001). Indonesia believed in democracy ideology with Muslims as the majority of Indonesians. The learning materials provided in the website were appropriate based on Islamic and democracy values. For example, *number to tens* which was already mastered by Indonesian children at the age of 4. It was little bit too early for them to learn numbers but learning it again is useful for reinforcing prior knowledge.

Further, the political view of democracy in the website was accepted in Indonesia as Indonesia and America had the same ideology, *i.e.*, democracy. Therefore, there would not be an issue to accept the learning materials and their content to be implemented in Indonesian classrooms. Nevertheless, writing about States in America would be very difficult for Indonesian children as they were not getting the general knowledge yet. They would not be able to write anything as one of the tests asked learners to write information about each state. Also, the terms were different, where we, Indonesians, used province instead of states to mention region with its local government within a country. These learning materials should be used for older learners aged between 10 until 12 years old. In other words, this topic was good but it very much focused on America, which might be difficult for children aged 6 until 8 years old. The main point here was the target learners' level and needs should be reconsidered.

From *critical social inquiry* perspective, the website could be represented as a medium to introduce American socio-cultural and political aspects. For example, States in the USA like Arizona was introduced in the website, which meant learners needed to adjust themselves to different terms in governmental hierarchy and liberalism in America. Liberalism itself encouraged people to talk and act freely, which meant the learning materials in the website might have varied genres or themes. In terms of appropriateness in social context, however, those genre or themes might differ between one country to another. For example, *hangmouse* game was not familiar in Indonesia as Indonesians did not keep a mouse as a pet. Thus, this game acknowledged socio-cultural of Americans and also enhanced creativity to make decision freely on naming a game.

From *critical theory* perspective, the website looked good and appropriate for young learners. However, there was an issue of inequality when the website was used in an Indonesian classroom. The issue was not all of parents were capable to monitor their children to use the website at home. Computer proficiency and English proficiency of parents were the causes of that constraint. Although *spellingcity.com* was free and easy to get, different topics presented in the website required parents to have broad general knowledge, particularly, for parents who had resources and sent their children to an English course, yet, they were still not able to speak or spell a word in English. Thus, forum for parents was good and important but lack of proficiency would make parents reluctant to maximise its usage.

Also, there was a *problematizing givens* reflected in the website, in which the website was only teaching spelling and vocabulary as the language code without showing learners how to apply that language knowledge through context. In other words, learners' understanding was questioned. Writing activities, such as jumbled letter, jumbled words, sentence writing, and paragraph writing were provided to assist learners to demonstrate their understanding in the form of written works. However, those

writing activities were restricted with only few questions and learners could always get back to answer them repeatedly if they failed, which resulted in memorisation of the answers. Thus, the learning materials in the website were sufficient for the 6 until 8 years old learners but they should be created to ensure learners' comprehension was the primary target.

On the other hand, the *self-reflexive* of the website was drilling learners with vocabulary and spelling tasks, which once again underlined memorisation of words. These types of tasks might be boring for some learners; therefore it was recommended that interactive games should be developed by the website.

The last keyword of CAL was *preferred futures* which predicted that the website was going to be used over and over again to introduce basic components of English aspects, *i.e.*, vocabulary and spelling. It was expected that the website would also produce better games and learning materials to enhance learners' knowledge of English in the future. Alternatively, online and interactive games with interesting animation and design should be created as well as some drawing activities to enhance learners' vocabulary knowledge.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Intertextuality, discourse, genre, subjectivity, reading positions, hegemony and power relationship were CDA keywords used to analyse the website (Gee, 1996 as cited in Baldauf, 2010). These keywords would look at different texts, themes, topics used in the website to analyse how learners would learn and practice from various activities provided as well as problems they might encounter on the process of learning.

The first text was sentence practice, in which learners were able to practise their own sentences. There was a power relationship here, where learners were able to make their own decision of learning. This activity was good and challenging but it only worked for learners aged 9 until 10 years old. Paragraph writing was also provided and it was suitable for learners aged between 11 until 12 years old. Power relationship in this activity was similar to sentence writing, which was self-decision. In other words, learners had power of what to do but teachers also had power to control the activities through marking and commenting on learners' work.

On the contrary, sentence unscramble was suitable for young learners since the sentences in the game were pretty simple and easy to memorise. From CDA keywords, this game had self-decision (power relationship) and subjectivity, where learners might make wrong answers based on guesses (not knowledge).

The next text was a vocabulary game called *word search*, which showed learners' reading position as readers and test takers. Their task was to find out the words in the list as quickly as they could. The timing here was the power relationship, which controlled learners' activity and caused subjectivity of the game. Since this game was only measuring how quick a learner finished a game, it could not be used for judging his English proficiency. In short, better learners were sometimes slower starters.

On the other hand, *speedy speller* was an interactive game by listening to a word and reading few hints before a learner decided to write it in the computer. This game represented various topics (genre) and discourse through listening and writing stages.

Furthermore, *matchit* was a quite difficult task for young learners. Therefore, it was more suitable for certain ages of 9 until 10 years old. Matching a word and its corresponding sentence are difficult without having sufficient English vocabulary. Therefore, there was an assumption here that learners who did this activity had an adequate knowledge to complete it (hegemony). Unlike *matchit*, *crossword* was an easy game, which integrated reading skills and bank of vocabulary in learners' mind (memory capacity). The words used were simple and the game played was based on learners' own words (power relationship to control the text).

The next games were letter fall, alphabetize and missing letter, which were also easy games because they only focused on how well learners recognised letters were. The intertextuality itself of these games was learners knew and mastered American spelling beforehand. However, it led to another contradictive view, in which learners might try to imitate American accent, but it did not necessarily to be like that. It meant that learning a language was not learning an accent but knowing how to use the language.

On the other hand, *hangmouse* was a challenging game as after 7 tries learners might lose the game. By doing this game, learners would rely on their memory to finish the game, which meant there was not any clue given in order to accomplish the task. Shortly, it was interesting to know that the power relationship here was the game itself, which controlled the learning process rather than the users. Games such as *unscramble*, *audio word match* and *which word* were vocabulary games which required prior knowledge of learners. Memorisation might be happened as one topic chosen by a learner was

applied to all games. For example, when a learner selected *homophones*, he might try to remember the words and their spelling. As homophones meant different words were pronounced the same, they would get problems to notice the differences. In terms of CDA, homophones required critical thinking skills of differing one sound to another (phonology), for example *too* and *two*. In order to distinguish the words, sentences activity such as *whichword* was used (Fairclough, 1992 as cited in Baldauf, 2010).

Conclusions and Implications for English Language Teaching (ELT)

Conclusions

The use of *spellingcity.com* implied that independent study and assistance from parents were essential. The website was very good for elementary level and young learners. The learning materials were fun and underlined learners' creativity. It also had several interactive games and activities, which maximised the roles of parents and teachers. However, the website seemed to allow memorisation and it would affect the learning outcomes. Memorisation was good for young learners as young children's brains was elastic so that they could remember most of the words easily (Lennenberg, 1969). However, memorisation did not work for longer term (Cameron, 2001). In other words, learning outcomes for long term use was different, where learners might not be able to use their childhood knowledge in communication.

In order to overcome memorisation issue, the website was only used to practise for 2 hours a day. Playing games in the classroom and the use of realia were other choices of teaching techniques. The main point here was not only engaging learners with fun activities but also giving them real context of language use. For example, asking learners to do *show and tell*. Prior to this oral presentation, learners should bring their favourite toys or books to be discussed in the classroom.

In conclusion, the website was a good supplementary learning material but it would not be used as the primary resource. Adopting and adapting some topics in the website were difficult as this was a free website and administered by the *spellingcity.com* creator in the United States of America. Therefore, teachers were also required to use learning software created by local industries in order to meet learners' needs, learning style and also suitable materials for different ages.

Implications for English Language Teaching (ELT)

There are several implications for English language teaching after analysing *spellingcity.com* in terms curriculum and pedagogical implications. The website can be embedded into the curriculum as one of learning media to be used by teachers, where *spellingcity.com* will be selected in the lesson plans. Furthermore, *spellingcity.com* will be applied in the classroom as supplementary materials to introduce spelling, vocabulary and writing activities.

Limitation of the Study and Future Directions

Having discussed the implications of *spellingcity.com* as the learning media for beginners and young learners, this study also has some limitations in terms of research-based used. This study only literature review based, where CAL and CDA keywords were used to evaluate *spellingcity.com*. All of the conclusions that have been drawn should be further investigated when the website is used in teaching learning process. In other words, further study on how effective this website for teaching spelling, vocabulary, and writing should be conducted as well as teachers and learners' perspectives on the use of *spellingcity.com* as a medium of learning English.

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