EX*CHANGE: An ESL Web Magazine

In an initial attempt to implement language learning resources on the Web, Li and other graduate students at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign[1] founded the ESL Web magazine *EX*CHANGE* (Shetzer, 1995; Zhao, Li, & Hegelheimer, 1995). Their purpose was to explore ways in which high quality ESL learning resources could be accumulated, organized, and presented on the Web. The magazine was mainly intended to serve individual ESL learners at the intermediate level, although ESL instructors also can (and do) use it as supplementary material for their classes (see sample page below).

content of the materials, and overall organization is imposed by editorial decision.

Both models have their merits. The participatory, dialoguelike nature of the bulletin board was attractive, but in the end the publication model seemed more appropriate for ESL learners because the quality and grammatical accuracy of what they read would affect the quality of their learning.
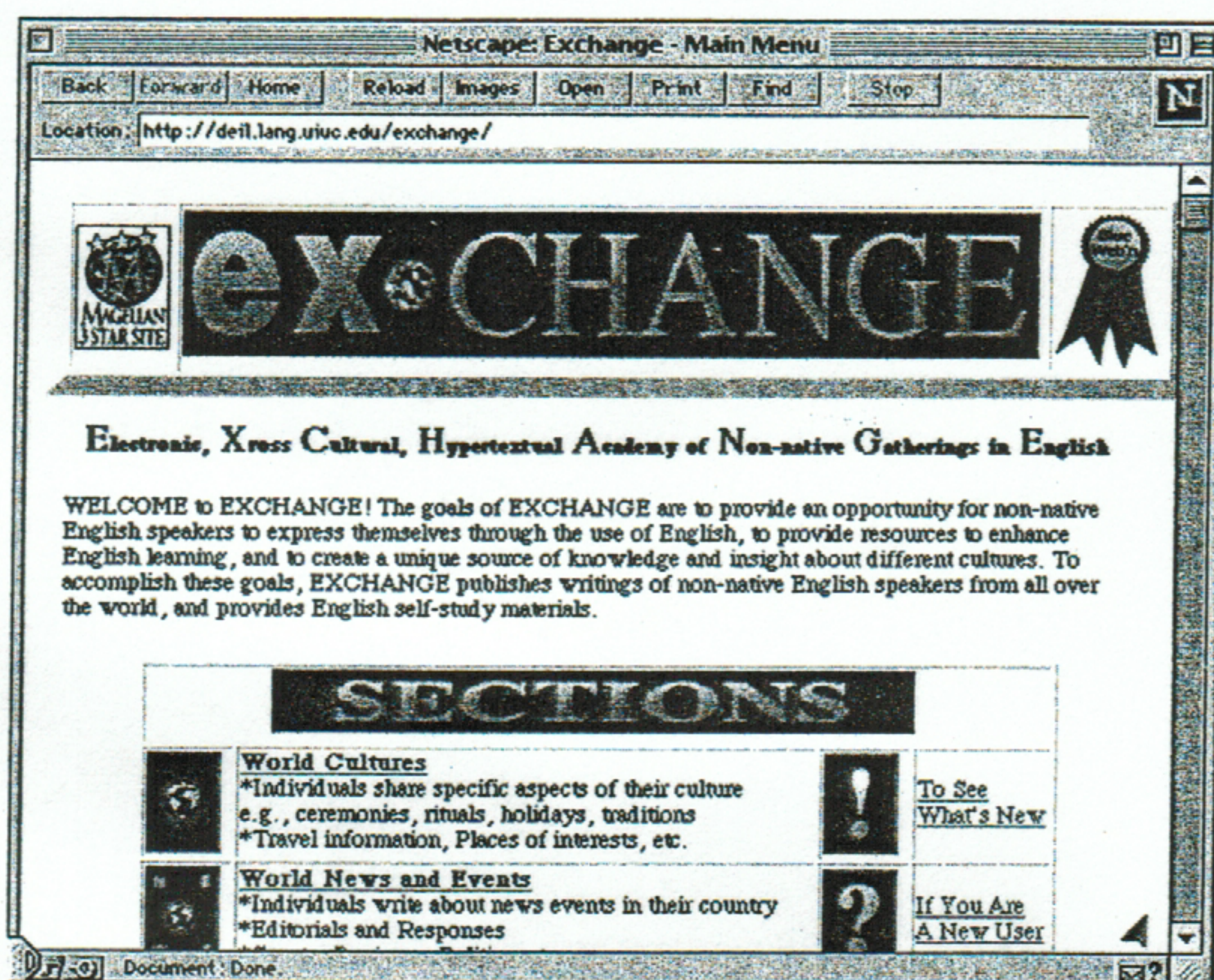
EX*CHANGE's Editorial Departments

Organized to promote the dual functions of promoting communication among ESL learners and serving as a resource archive, *EX*CHANGE* arranges its content in four editorial departments, or sections: World

reading materials with a comprehension check, discussion of writing strategies, grammar tutorials, and English conversations that help students learn oral English. There are also an English idiom bank and links to an online dictionary and some ESL newsgroups. To enable users to find what they need with a minimum of effort, *EX*CHANGE* aids its readers by offering a built-in search capability such that users can type in key words in order to locate specific materials in past issues of the magazine.

As an edited magazine, *EX*CHANGE* depends on (mainly unsolicited) submissions from its readers. Both ESL teachers and learners contribute via the forms within *EX*CHANGE* itself or by e-mail. The editors (all experienced ESL teachers) read the submissions and send them back with comments and corrections, requesting when appropriate that ESL student writers revise and resubmit their articles. The World Cultures, News, and Stories sections were designed to elicit participation and encourage interaction among readers. They have succeeded in doing this, but not as well as we had hoped. The intervention of an editorial apparatus slows and inhibits spontaneous interaction. Many would-be student contributors are undoubtedly intimidated by the prospect of having their errors critiqued by unknown editors and by the labor involved in revision, while instructors may feel pressure to spend time writing for professional journals for which the rewards are more tangible.

The editors of the new magazine considered two common modes of Web publishing as a possible format for the publication. One was the bulletin board or discussion group, of which Sperling's (1995) *ESL Graffiti Wall* Web page is an example. Bulletin boards are almost always moderated, but control over what is posted is traditionally minimal, and they typically have a conversational quality. The main mode of organization is imposed by whatever conversational "threads" or topics the participants happen to evolve. The second model is traditional periodicals, in which issues appear at fixed intervals, close control is maintained over the quality and

Cultures, Current News and Events, Stories, and the Learning Resource Center. In the World Cultures section, ESL students write about aspects of their cultures such as birthdays in Germany, weddings in India, and old men in Korea. The Current News and Events section reports events that are currently happening in various countries in the world. In the Stories section, ESL students develop exciting chain stories. The topics of these sections reflect what we perceived to be important preoccupations of ESL students and were intended to encourage contributions from readers. The largest section is the Learning Resource Center, which contains

Advantages of Electronic Medium Over Print

Nevertheless, *EX*CHANGE* has proved to have substantial advantages over a traditional paper magazine. As with any other electronic magazine, the time and effort needed to publish articles is reduced. Communication between editors and writers is through e-mail. All the contributions are submitted and published in electronic form, which makes it easier and faster to get the work done and possible to post new material as soon as it is available. Color pictures, audio, and even video, can be presented as inexpensively as text. Archival material is easy to maintain and retrieve. Perhaps most important, it is possible to build a wide audience without extensive (and costly) promotion and advertising. As soon as *EX*CHANGE* went online, standard Web search facilities introduced it to the ESL community, and the magazine

They do, however, show that we cannot trust our intuition in these matters and so suggest the value of further experimental work.