REFRESHING PUBLISHING GUIDES

Issue 1: Improving Digital Accessibility

How accessible is your digital content? As an eLearning developer, instructional designer or publisher, you're possibly already making good progress on ensuring that the digital content that you produce (and the print derived eBook content as well, for that matter) is accessible to all. If so, well done. With the European Accessibility Act coming into force in June 2025, many content developers are auditing their existing content to see exactly how accessible it really is. Read on for some tips and advice as to how to improve your digital accessibility.

In this Refreshing Publishing Guide to Digital Accessibility, you'll find the following:

- The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and what they are.
- An overview of the WCAG standards.
- Why these standards are important.
- What this means for English language teaching and materials development.
- An accessibility checklist for reading texts.

In future Refreshing Publishing Guides, you'll find out about alternative text for images, using colour and colour contrast, the concept of shifting left, a bit about screen readers, and dealing with audio and video content.

The Web Content Accessibility (WCAG) Guidelines

Web accessibility means that people with disabilities can equally perceive, understand, navigate and interact with websites and tools. It also means that they can contribute equally without barriers (The World Wide Web Consortium, W3C).

Often content developers and publishers focus on providing content that is accessible for those who have visual impairments, for example by providing an audio recording of a reading text. Similarly, much has been done to try and help those users who may have dyslexia through providing texts that are easier to read through colour contrast, font, font size and spacing.

However, that's not the complete picture. How about those users who have hearing, motor, cognitive or even speaking impairments? You also need to ensure that your online content also meets their needs, as per the above definition.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) seek to identify the various different areas where content developers can make their content more accessible to users. There are three levels of conformance:

Level A includes 30 basic standards
Level AA includes 20 intermediate standards
and Level AAA includes 28 advanced (optional) standards

It's not necessarily the case that you need to achieve all 50 standards at levels A and AA in order to finally say that your content is fully compliant and accessible. There may be some standards that are not necessarily relevant to your particular situation. For example, if your content contains no video then there are a number of standards that will not be relevant. Similarly, there are other standards relating to the provision of sign language although there are alternative standards that could be implemented instead.

Consequently, it is important to audit your existing catalogue of courseware to determine what assets you have in place and what elements of your content might need to be amended in order to make them more accessible.

Why are accessibility standards important?

Let's imagine that you have created a new online course for English language learners. So far, you have 1000 learners subscribed to this course. How many of those learners will be able to access your course without difficulty? Is access equal and equitable?

According to the UK Government, of those 1000 people who have signed up for your course, 770 of them will have vision issues, including blindness, low/poor vision and cataracts. Out of 1000 people, 180 will have hearing loss and 100 will have dyslexia. When you consider things like dexterity issues, learning impairments, colour vision issues, low numeracy and mental health problems, it becomes clear that there are many people who may well want to access your content but are prevented from doing so because the content doesn't have the necessary support in place. Think of it this way, accessibility is not about disability. It is about people with different abilities.

A summary of the WCAG standards

The WCAG standards cover things like:
- subtitles and closed captioning
- when to use audio players vs audio play buttons
- using alternative text for image descriptions
- text descriptions for charts and graphs
- choice of font
- colour contrast.

All of these have an impact on the materials, both print and digital, that are produced for English language learners.
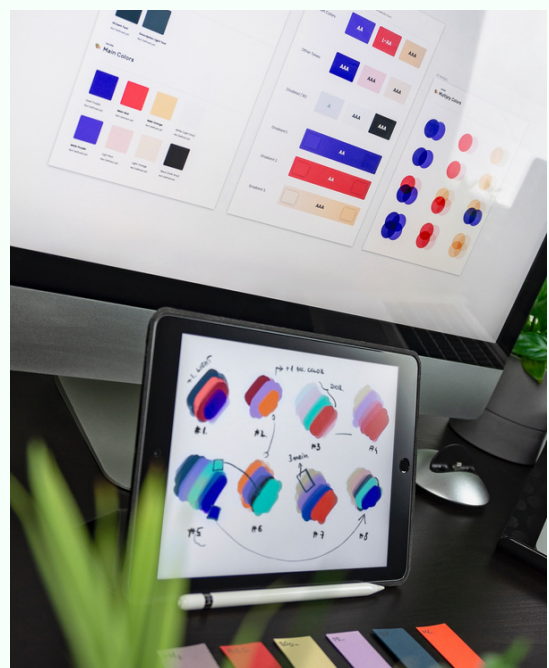
The standards are categorised as follows:

- **Perceivable** – content and the user interface should be presented in a way that users are able to see, hear and understand. This includes providing text alternatives for the likes of images, captions, audio description and not relying solely on sensory characteristics like sound, colour or shape when providing instructions.
- **Operable** – the user interface components must be capable of being used in different ways, including via a keyboard with users being provided with enough time to be able to read and access the content.
- **Understandable** – the content and navigation should be presented in a consistent manner. If there is, for example, a multiple choice activity then this should be presented in the same way as all other multiple choice activities so to aid understanding and recognition of that type of interaction and to reduce cognitive strain. Similarly, navigation items should be presented using consistent text labels and colours.
- **Robust** – can, for example, screen readers access and read your online content. What about other assistive technologies? Are there any compatibility issues?

What does this mean for ELT

Here are some of the WCAG standards that would be of particular relevance to ELT digital content development.

- **Standard 1.1.1, Level A**: non-text content (e.g. an image) that has a text alternative that serves an equivalent purpose.
- **Standard 1.2.1, Level A**: audio-only and video-only (pre-recorded): any audio only content should be described in text. Any video without audio can be described in text or audio.
- **Standard 1.2.2, Level A**: captions (pre-recorded) are provided for pre-recorded audio content.

- **Standard 1.2.3, Level A**, and **1.2.5, Level AA**: audio description is provided for pre-recorded video content. This can be provided in the natural pauses in the video.
- **Standard 1.2.7, Level AAA**: extended audio description can be provided for pre-recorded video content. Extended audio description pauses the video to add in important information. This can be useful when your video does not have many or long natural pauses.
- **Standard 1.2.8, Level AAA**: media alternatives can be provided for audio and video content, e.g. transcripts for video content.
- **Standard 1.3.1, Level A**: any headings or labels used clearly show how the content is related.
- **Standard 1.3.3, Level A**: when providing instructions, do not rely solely on sensory characteristics such as shape, colour, size, visual location, orientation or sound.
- **Standard 1.4.1, Level A**: do not only use colour to convey information, indicate an action, prompt a response or distinguish a visual element.
- **Standard 1.4.2, Level A**: audio controls are provided for audio that is more than 3 seconds long so that users can stop or pause it.
- **Standard 1.4.3, Level AA**: text has a contrast ration of 4.5 to 1.
- **Standard 1.4.4, Level AA**: text can be resized up to 200% without loss of content or functionality.
- **Standard 1.4.5, Level AA**: do not use images of text, use actual text.
- **Standard 1.4.7, Level AAA**: if your audio is primarily speech in the foreground, there should be no background noise or the background noise can be turned off or the background noises are 20 decibels lower than the foreground dialogue.
- **Standard 2.1.1, Level A**: all content can be accessed using a keyboard.
- **Standard 2.1.2, Level A**: there are no keyboard traps, i.e. if you use your keyboard to enter an additional component or window on the screen, you are able to exit it successfully.
- **Standard 2.2.1, Level A**: any time limits set by the content can be turned off, adjusted or extended.
- **Standard 2.2.2, Level A**: any automatically animated or moving content that lasts more than 5 seconds can be stopped.
- **Standard 2.3.1, Level A**: nothing flashes or flickers more than 3 times a second.

Accessibility checklist: text content

1. Use a minimum of 12-point font size
2. Avoid using all caps
3. Use bold font for emphasis
4. Avoid using underlining or italics
5. For English and other left-to-right languages, left align the text but do not right align
6. Use sans serif fonts to improve readability but use a variety of different sans serif fonts to create a visual hierarchy of information (e.g. with headings and sub-headings versus body text)
7. Use plain language appropriate for your audience
8. Check the colour contrast between the text and the background. The contrast ratio should be at least 4.5:1
9. Use inclusive language (e.g. 'select' rather than 'click')

Useful links

WCAG quick reference: https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG22/quickref/?versions=2.1

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