Finding and evaluating information obtained from the Internet and using it effectively in language teaching.

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Abstract

The Internet has provided great opportunities for English learning, particularly for ESP. Finding sources in the Internet is both interesting and challenging for students because they feel they are conducting their own research, dealing with authentic materials and discussing their results with other researchers. The Internet has a lot to offer, but not all sources are equally valuable or reliable. Conducting research on the Internet can challenge even an experienced researcher. The Internet resources are so numerous that it is easy to be confused by too many options. In addition these resources vary greatly in purpose and quality. They may reflect the opinion of an individual, marketing understanding of a profit-driven business, the beliefs of an advocate that acknowledges only one side of a story etc. The present article discusses ways of finding and evaluating online sources.

Today, the importance of the Internet in society is undeniable. The internet is a system with which we can know the global conditions within no time. Not only the information on the internet about the whole world is available but it has revolutionized the communication techniques. This new invention has given a large projection to communication. It is a wonderful tool for individuals and organizations that want to reach large numbers of people. It is also a great resource for finding information on current events. The emergence of the Internet has created another information resource for conducting research, and it is impossible to imagine a course in any discipline without addressing the web.

The internet has provided great opportunities especially for English learning, and particularly for ESP. As it has already been mentioned in the article "Integrating the internet into English teaching" language learners can use authentic materials from different Internet sources which engage students in reading extensively on a topic related to their discipline, performing tasks of increasing complexity, and creating oral or written texts to present the results of their online work. (M.Apresyan, D. Bagiryan< FLSP#6, p.9). Through the Internet it is possible to find not only text files but also audio and video files. Students may use e-mail and may chat with their friends from English- speaking countries, which certainly increases fluency. The Internet has become very valuable as a source of texts, especially in a situation where textbooks with the same material are not available. A lot of activities can be created basing on authentic materials taken from the internet.

The internet is in fact an interconnection of millions of people. Students and teachers having contact with the internet can get information of any kind and about any subject. Businessmen can advertise their product by it. Doctors can exchange latest information about medical problems. In short, information concerned with every department can be obtained from the internet.

The advantages of the Internet are numerous. And it has a lot to offer, but not all sources are equally valuable or reliable. Conducting research on the internet – including the vast, disorganized arena called World Wide Web – can challenge even an experienced researcher. The Internet resources are so numerous that you can easily be confused by too many options. In addition these resources vary greatly in purpose and quality. They may reflect the opinion of an individual, marketing understanding of a profit-driven business, the beliefs of an advocate that acknowledges only one side of a story etc. The present article will discuss ways of finding and evaluating online sources.

Finding sources in the Internet can be both interesting and challenging. It is interesting for students because they feel they are conducting their own research, dealing with authentic materials and discussing their results with other researchers. The role of the teacher here is to provide them with information about reliable sources from reliable source engines. Search engines are electronic indexes of words and terms from Web pages. In order to use them more effectively it is important to understand their features. Each search engine has its own system of locating and categorizing material as well as establishing sequence for reporting results. It is important to remember that sponsored links come up first on the list though latter sites might better match the searcher`s needs. The students should understand that instead of beginning their Web search with a few key words, they`d better go first to online resources recommended by their instructor, department or other reliable source. It will not only save their time but will directly lead them to respected resources, prepared by experts. The following are the addresses for some commonly used search engines.

Google   www.google.com

Infoseek   infoseek.go.com

Lycos   www.lycos.com

MSN Search   search.msn.com

WebCrawler   www.webcrawler.com

Alta Vista   www.altavista.com

For those who are looking for news stories the following can be useful.

Google News   www.google.com/news

Total NEWS   www.totalnews.com

It is also possible to find more comprehensive search engines which can be used by starters.

Dogpile   www.dogpile.com

Metacrawler   www.metacrawler.com

Some search engines like Yahoo (www.yahoo.com)and Yandex(www.yandex.com)offer
subject directories, which are collections of web sources arranged topically. Web directories can
include categories like Art, Health, Education and some others. It is easier to use subject
directories because most of the irrelevant sites are omitted. For academic and professional
research the following useful subject directories can be used.

Academic Info   www.academicinfo.net

Encyclopedia Britannica Online   www.britannica.com

The Internet Public Library   www.ipl.org/ref

The WWW Virtual Library   vlib.org

It should be mentioned here that although the Internet is a popular research technique, neither
teachers nor students should overestimate it. It is not the only technique that should be used. It is
important to remember that the Internet materials should be used with and not instead of other
sources such as library books, journals and others. Moreover search engines cover only the
information that allows free access. On-line books and database services are available only to
paid subscribers, but Armenian students hardly fall into this category. It is more likely that they
would try to find free information. In this case it is more efficient to use more than one search
engine for their research.

Students need to learn to evaluate the quality of information they find on the web as well as other information resources such as books, magazines, CD-ROM, and television.
The students should be also informed that some websites were designed to be intentionally misleading. These websites may be parodies, satire, hoaxes, or designed to show students the importance of questioning information found on the web.

Read Intentionally Misleading Web Sites by Frank Westcott. tech Learning, April 1, 2005

The following websites for instance can be used to explore the issue of the Internet content. Some are real and some are fake or silly. Students should learn to question EVERYTHING they read. When filtering information, students need to understand the spectrum of options between fact and opinion. Issues of perspective, point of view, and bias must be discussed. One of the advantages of using the Internet with students is the availability of so many examples. Students can see misinformation and propaganda in action. Giving students the opportunity to question their findings and discuss their concerns can turn into a very useful activity.

- Aluminum Foil Deflector Beanie
- Facts About from Idiotica
- Should we ban dihydrogen monoxide (DHMO)?
- Mankato Minnesota Home Page, New Hartford
- Backup Mankato Site, Another Backup
- Burmese Mountain Dog
- Museum of Hoaxes
- California's Velcro Crop under Challenge (1993)
- Did the Holocaust happen?
- Physics and Star Trek
- The Faked Apollo Landings

A few websites are addressing the issue of misleading information. These websites can be used as an illustration to help the students identify fact and fiction. It is necessary to keep in mind that even these websites should only be one of many sources of information.

- Snopes - the best source for factual information about rumors
- Others
  - Hoaxbusters from CIAC (Computer Incident Advisory Capability, U.S. Dept. of Energy)
  - Hoax-Slayer - email hoaxes and current Internet scams.
  - Urban Legends and Folklore from About.com by D. Emery
  - Truth or Fiction - before you forward that email...check it out.
  - Straight Dope - their mission is to fight ignorance

In order to find sources that can be useful for further work or research it is important to evaluate them, to assess their credibility and to determine if they are relevant and timely as well. Credible authors present information accurately, support their opinions with evidence, connect their ideas reasonably and demonstrate respect for any opposing views. To evaluate the credibility of the authors of the source, several things should be taken into account: credentials of

the authors, responses of other readers, and worldview that informs their ideas.

When considering whether the source is trustworthy, it is very important to find out if the author has credentials that are relevant to the topics they address. Credentials may include qualifications, degrees, academic and professional training, publications, and experience. Reliable sites like AIBS (www.action.bioscience.org) and The Internet TESL Journal, (http://iteslj.org/) usually provide background information about the authors. Thus, basing on such information, it is easier to estimate that for instance, a college biology professor who specializes in genetics is likely to be credible when writing about genes, but would not necessarily be considered as a credible source of information on zoology.

Cheryl Glenn and Loretta Gray in the book "Hodges` Harbrace Handbook" offer the following checklist for assessing an author`s credentials:

- Does the author`s education or profession relate to the subject of the work?
- With what institutions, organizations, or companies has the author been affiliated?
- What awards has the author won?
- What other works has the author produced?
- Do other experts speak of the author as an authority?

It is also possible to learn more about the authors by searching the Internet about them. General search engines like Google or Alta Vista or a specialized search engine such as the People search option offered by Lycos (www.whowhere.lycos.com) can be used for this purpose. Either type of engine will locate sites containing background information on the author or bibliographical information about his work.

When reading and using this or that source, it is important to keep in mind that they reflect the worldviews of the authors and often of the audience for whom they were written. The information can be represented and reported only after these various values and beliefs have been identified. It is important to determine how the source can be used: as fact, opinion, support, authoritative testimony, or material to be refuted.

When evaluating a Web site, it is necessary to consider the nature of the site and its sponsor. Some sites are created by individuals working on their own, but many others are sponsored by colleges and universities, professional and nonprofit organizations, as well as commercial enterprises. The type of sponsor is typically indicated in the site`s address by a suffix that represents the domain. Colleges and universities are indicated by .edu, government departments and agencies by .gov, professional and non-profit organizations by .org, network sites by .net, and businesses by .com. Of course it is possible to access any or all of the types of the sites depending on the nature of students` research, but when evaluating their content it should be remembered that every site is shaped to achieve a specific purpose and to address a target audience.

Useful sources also present up-to-date information. The date on which a Web site was established or last updated frequently appears on the site.

A source is useful only when it is relevant to the research question. Students should be prepared to pick up only the information that corresponds to their research from the huge and ever-growing amount of information. Searching the World Wide Web in English can be a difficult task for language students conducting project work as it often requires a high degree of linguistic ingenuity. Generally, search engines can be searched by broad categories such as *health* or

education or by more specific keywords. When searching is limited simply to keywords and broad categories, students may be overwhelmed with information not directly related to their research question. Students need help in using their existing vocabulary knowledge in the preparation of keywords, which can be used as 'search terms' about the topic.

The World Wide Web has changed everything in regards to information. This revolution is in its infancy and it is understandable that students have trouble evaluating the information they find on the Web. No standard has arisen that allows for web information to be evaluated in the same way print materials have been in the past.

The demands of web searching are as much linguistic as procedural and we as language teachers should not assume that language learners can use search engines to search the Web effectively in English, without some training. With a little guidance in the areas pointed in this study, students can really be educated to be good users of the information on the World Wide Web.

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