

# **A Study of Upper and Lower Secondary School Students' Difficulties with Language in Using the Internet for Independent Learning**

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## **Abstract**

This action research aims to examine how language influences secondary school learners' Internet use. It also compares the findings between different levels of secondary school students in terms of linguistic difficulties, learners' level of interest, and their process of learning. The subjects were five M.2 learners and four M.5 learners at Surasakmontree School. The two groups participated in a small-scale project using the Internet for retrieving information of their own interest. Follow-up questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data. The information obtained from the study indicated that lower level students had more difficulty concerning vocabulary and background knowledge. However, learners' level of interest, needs of psychological and methodological preparation and their process of learning were not much different. The findings reveal that the learners can make use of information technology with proper support from the teacher to serve their individual learning purpose.

## **Background of the study**

According to the National Education Act of 1999 (chapter 4: section 22), educational institutes are mandated to co-operate in carrying out the following policy:

"Education shall be based on the principle that all learners are capable of learning and self-development, and are regarded as being most important. The teaching and learning process shall aim at enabling the learner to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potentiality."

(Office of the National Education Commission, 1999: 10)

From this policy learners will receive chances and choices to learn on their own and there is a need to encourage the learners to develop themselves to be autonomous learners. To enhance the practicality of this policy, technology for education plays a vital role as shown in the excerpt below:

"Learners shall have the right to develop their capabilities for utilization of technologies for education as soon as feasible so that they shall have sufficient knowledge and skills in using these technologies for acquiring knowledge themselves on a continual lifelong basis."

(Office of the National Education Commission, 1999: 28)

As aforementioned, learners should get more support in terms of technologies from the educational institutions to gain more learning benefits so as to retrieve information for their study as well as their lifelong learning purposes. Surasakmontree School, therefore, provides Internet facilities to encourage learners to learn independently. Since the researchers have been interested in the field of resource-based learning that aims to promote learners accessing learning on their own with the teacher as a facilitator or counselor, this study was conducted to see how both lower and upper levels of secondary school learners utilized the Internet for independent learning. Banditvilai (2000) claims that the Internet provides a kind of electronic reading material that can give learners greater exposure to English and involve them more in their learning. Moreover, Gardner and Miller (1996) report that the Internet is one form of self-access learning which encourage learners to be active by increasing their control over their learning process, decreasing their dependency on the teacher, and developing their sense of responsibility. In addition, this study also aims to examine how the students deal with language difficulties or any other factors involved during their Internet use and whether there was any difference between their needs for psychological and methodological preparation.

### **Research procedures**

There were 2 groups of subjects chosen from 57 M.2 (second year of lower secondary school equivalent to grade 8) students and 67 M.5 (second year of upper secondary school equivalent to grade 11) students based on three conditions. Firstly, they had received training in computer use offered by the school. Secondly, they were familiar with Internet use. And finally, they had good grades in English courses. Eventually, 5 subjects from M.2 and 4 subjects from M.5 level were chosen. Both groups of subjects were asked to select a topic of their interest. It came out that M.2 subjects' topic was "animal" whereas M.5 subjects were interested in "western music". Then examples of widely used search engines as well as names of websites were introduced to each group of subjects separately. After that the subjects were asked to surf at least 6 websites to get information about their topic either at the school Internet room or at their own places. After they finished surfing and gained enough information about the selected topic, they needed to summarize the main idea of the texts they had read. Then each subject was asked to fill in a questionnaire consisting of 2 main parts (see Appendix). In the first part, the subjects were asked to rate the difficulty of the site they liked most in terms of language. In the second part of the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to reveal how they dealt with difficulties of language and background knowledge as well as their primary reading strategy.

The subjects' responses to Part I of the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of mean scores which were interpreted as follows.

4.21 to 5.00	=	Extremely
3.41 to 4.20	=	A lot/Very
2.61 to 3.40	=	Fairly/Somewhat
1.81 to 2.60	=	Not much
1.00 to 1.80	=	Not at all

In Part II of the questionnaire, the subjects' responses to each item were calculated using percentages. Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the subjects individually. The qualitative data from the interview were categorized under similar themes to support the data from the questionnaire.

## Findings

The responses of the two groups of the subjects to the first part of the questionnaire were compared and are shown in Table 1.

What They Think about the Site	M.2 subjects $\bar{X}$	M.5 subjects $\bar{X}$
1. How did you like this site?	4.00	4.00
2. How relevant is this site to your interests?	3.60	4.00
3. How difficult was this site in terms of grammar?	4.00	4.00
4. How difficult was this site in terms of content?	3.80	4.00
5. How difficult was this site in terms of vocabulary?	4.00	4.00
6. How familiar were you with the content provided in this site?	2.80	3.00
7. How attractive was this site?	3.40	3.00
8. How informative was this site?	4.60	4.00
9. How much new information did you learn from the site?	4.40	5.00
10. Would you still use the Internet for further project work?	4.60	4.00

Table 1 Results of questionnaire part I

As can be seen from the table, the answers of the two groups of the subjects are similar. Both groups indicated that the selected site was very favorable, relevant to their interest, informative and they learned a lot of new information from it. Furthermore, there is a high tendency that they would use the Internet for their independent learning in the future. They felt fairly familiar with the information provided and they rated the site as somewhat attractive. However, with respect to language, both groups had a lot of difficulty with grammar, vocabulary, and content.

To find out how the subjects solved the difficulties in their Internet use concerning grammar, vocabulary, content, background knowledge as well as their reading strategies, the responses to Part II of the questionnaire were categorized and presented in percentages. Table 2 shows how each respondent dealt with difficulties in vocabulary:

How the Respondents Dealt with Unknown Vocabulary	M. 2	M.5
• Look up in a dictionary	100%	75%
• Guess meaning from contextual clues	100%	75%
• Others (Please specify.)	80%	25%
• Ignore it	0%	0 %

Table 2 How the subjects dealt with unknown vocabulary

It can be seen that all respondents' primary decision-making to deal with difficult vocabulary is looking up the meaning of unknown words from both paper-printed and online dictionaries. In addition, guessing the meaning from the context to assist them to understand the text more easily was another major consideration by all respondents. To tackle unknown words, 80 percent of M.2 respondents and 25 percent of M5 subject consulted with friends and family. The findings from the interview suggest that the students need more support concerning word-tackling techniques.

To the question of how the two groups dealt with grammar, their answers were compared and are shown in Table 3.

How the Respondents Dealt with Grammar	M. 2	M.5
• Try to understand the structure	80%	0%
• Try to guess meaning from the form	40%	75%
• Others (Please specify)	20%	25%
• Ignore it	0%	0%

Table 3 How the subjects dealt with grammar

The data reveal that the two groups of subjects were very concerned about grammar as none of them ignored it. While the majority of M.2 subjects tried to understand the structure, most M.5 subjects tried to guess the meaning from the form. A minority of both groups indicated that they asked for help from their teachers or their parents. The upper level could work out the relation between form and meaning to comprehend what they were reading more than the lower level. Both groups of respondents accepted in the interview that grammar had a great effect on their learning process.

Regarding content, the subjects' responses are presented below in Table 4.

How the Respondents Dealt with Content	M. 2	M.5
• Look for the main idea	60%	0%
• Read all the information to get the detail	60%	50%
• Just look through	20%	50%
• Others (Please specify)	20%	25%

Table 4 How the subjects dealt with content

It can be seen that most M.2 respondents dealt with content by looking for the main idea, and reading for detail whereas half of M.5 respondents looked through the text or

read for detail. Only one M.2 subject dealt with the difficulties by selecting only interesting and easy content whereas one M.5 respondent tried to find new information that interested him. The data gained indicate that the subjects needed various reading strategies to cope with difficulties with content. This point is supported in the interview as all respondents said that they would have had less difficulty if they had better reading skills.

It is then interesting to see what the subjects did if they did not have sufficient background knowledge about the text they were reading as presented in Table 5.

How the Respondents Dealt with a Lack of Background Knowledge	M. 2	M.5
• Guess from the context	100%	100%
• Guess from the graphics	60%	0%
• Others (Please specify)	40%	0%

Table 5 How the subjects dealt with a lack of background knowledge

Table 5 reveals that all respondents tackled the problem of lacking the background knowledge by guessing from the context. 60 percent of the M.2 respondents clarified that graphics could help their guessing to some extent while none of the M.5 subjects made use of graphics. The other M.2 respondents tried to find some unknown words from dictionary and skipped some unfamiliar or colloquial words. However, from the semi-structured interview, three of the M.2 respondents agreed that existing knowledge played a vital role in their interest and motivation. Only one subject said that she would continue reading and expected that she would comprehend the whole text later on. On the other hand, all M.5 respondents said that they would read the text even though they lacked prior knowledge if the text was very interesting.

Table 6 presents what strategies the two levels of subjects employed while they were reading.

The Respondents' Primary Reading Strategies	M. 2	M.5
• Skim for the main ideas	80%	50%
• Read all of it to get the details	40%	75%
• Others (Please specify)	40%	25%
• Scan for only interesting points	20%	50%

Table 6 The subjects' primary reading strategies

The results reveal that lower level subjects use skimming, reading for detail and scanning respectively. On the other hand, the strategy employed by most M5 subjects was reading for detail, while either skimming or scanning was used by half of them. Another alternative for M2 level was selecting a text with not too many difficult words. Only one respondent of each group read the text again and again until they understood it.

Being asked in the interview about their choice of primary reading strategy, all subjects varied it according to their purpose of reading.

### **Implications and recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest that the Internet is a useful resource for both lower and upper secondary school students. This point is in agreement with the findings of research conducted by Banditvilai (2000) that the Internet gives Thai learners greater exposure to English and involve them more in their learning. Gardner and Miller (1996) also view the Internet as a resource for self-access learning since it encourages learners to be active by increasing their control over their sense of responsibility. As Sheerin (1989) reports, the most necessary language skill for independent learning is reading. This is because learners can access knowledge of the world, both about the language and about other subjects. Moreover, Gillet and Temple (2000) explain that reading has truly become the main vehicle for learning. They mean that the more learners read, the more they can find reading to enhance both enjoyment and usefulness. However, the data gained reveal that the students need support from the teacher to enable them to exploit this resource as effectively as possible. In other words, the students need both psychological preparation to gain self-confidence as well as methodological preparation to acquire the ability and techniques needed to undertake self-instruction (Dickinson, 1987).

*Psychological preparation* involves changing learners' attitude to persuade them that they have ability to be actively independent in their learning and to take their responsibility for learning on their own. Although the learners are highly motivated regarding Internet use and computer literate, they still need some psychological preparation to be tolerant of their own frustration due of the difficulties with language.

As revealed previously in the findings, the subjects at each level consulted a dictionary or turned to their parents or friends. Depending too much on dictionaries or human resources could demotivate them to some extent. They have to be patient about what they do not know in reading and try to tackle those problems by themselves. Therefore, teachers should train learners to be aware of their learning purposes and not to be distracted by irrelevant information. In addition, learners also have to be trained to be patient while reading an unfamiliar text. Guessing the meaning from the context clue or ignoring the word may be useful to reduce their anxiety. For this reason, it is the teachers' responsibility to increase their learners' confidence and positive attitudes towards their reading to learn.

*Methodological preparation* is concerned with preparing learners to undertake the actual tasks of language learning. This kind of preparation includes both strategy training and learner support or guidance for useful resources that the students can access by themselves.

*Strategy training* is a kind of scaffolding for learners to troubleshoot problems that occur. To be able to do this the learners need to be equipped with both learning strategies and language skills.

*Learning strategies* include all the strategies that encourage greater overall self-direction for learners as they use the language outside the classroom (Oxford, 1990: 10) In this situation, for instance, the learners always looked up unknown words from

printed and online dictionaries. It might be possible that they had chosen the website which is above their level and thus they should be trained to select the website which is suitable for their own level to reduce their anxiety and increase their confidence. Besides they can be trained to set definite learning objectives in order that they can ignore irrelevant information which may distract them from their main focus.

*Language skills needed* particularly in a situation like this study are reading strategies, vocabulary skills, dictionary skills as well as grammar and structure which can be practised outside class via the material of the students' choice. No matter where they practice, the learners should be trained to identify their own strength and weakness in each skill, and for this study particularly reading. The teacher can also encourage the students to get a study buddy to share their learning difficulties and help each other to solve the problems. For example, they may learn that they do not need to turn to the dictionary every time they come across new words if they learn to make use of collocation, affixes, context clues, visual support and knowledge of the world. In addition, they can collect a file of interesting texts that can be used to illustrate how those new words are used meaningfully in authentic texts. The ideas mentioned previously might be new to some students especially at the lower level who need more guidance and support from the teachers and the school.

*Learner support or guidance* can be provided in several forms such as project work proposed by Fried-Booth (1989) which offers opportunities for the students to use their language skills in a new and challenging way. Concerning leaning English via Internet, the teacher can classify and gather various useful websites which are proper for the students' level of proficiency with reference to particular skills.

The students should be reminded that they may need to have some background knowledge to retrieve information from some websites since it is a crucial factor that affects their understanding of the whole text (Gillet and Temple, 2000). Besides the problem with background knowledge, the students may need reference resources for all content-and language-related matters (Ribe and Vidal, 1993).

To sum up, with proper support and guidance both in terms of language and content, the Internet is one of the variety of resources for language learning which should be recommended to all levels of learners.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire

*Part I:* Rate selected web site for English Project Work in the space provided.

Each scale has the following meaning:

Rating scale:

- 5 – Extremely
- 4 – A lot/Very
- 3 – Fairly/Somewhat
- 2 – Not much
- 1 – Not at all

Statements	Your selected web site
1. How did you like this site?	
2. How relevant is this site to your interests?	
3. How difficult was this site in terms of grammar?	
4. How difficult was this site in terms of content?	
5. How difficult was this site in terms of vocabulary?	
6. How familiar were you with the content provided in this site?	
7. How attractive was this site?	
8. How informative was this site?	
9. How much new information did you learn from this site?	
10. How would you still use the Internet for your further project work?	

*Part II:* Please place a mark ( / ) in the boxes to clarify the way you dealt with the following issues. You can choose more than one answer. If you use any other strategies than those stated above, please write them down on Others (Please specify).

### ● *Unknown Vocabulary*

- ☐ Look up in a dictionary
- ☐ Guess meaning from the contextual clues
- ☐ Ignore it
- ☐ Others (Please specify)

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- **Grammar**
  - ☐ Try to understand the structures
  - ☐ Try to guess meaning from the form
  - ☐ Ignore it
  - ☐ Others (Please specify) .....
- **Content**
  - ☐ Just survey to see overall picture
  - ☐ Look for the main idea
  - ☐ Read all the information to get the detail
  - ☐ Others (Please specify) .....
- **Lack of Background Knowledge**
  - ☐ Guess from the context
  - ☐ Guess from the graphics
  - ☐ Others (Please specify) .....
- **Primary Reading Strategies**
  - ☐ Scan for only interesting points
  - ☐ Skim for the main ideas
  - ☐ Read all of it to get the detail
  - ☐ Others (Please specify) .....

☺Thank you very much for your co-operation☺

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