

Utilizing the Internet as an Integral Part of Teaching Reading

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Abstract

This article examines a teacher's experience of incorporating the Internet into a university level reading course. The overall objective was to improve the teaching of reading. The paper presents the procedure for accessing the Internet as a learning tool, including the new terminology associated with the use of the Internet. The effects of using the Internet were investigated through student report forms, diaries and interviews. The findings are predominantly positive, suggesting that other teachers may wish to integrate the use of the Internet with their reading courses.

Introduction

This paper will discuss why teachers should use the Internet to assist them in teaching of reading. The initial reasons behind the use of the Internet in this study are predominantly practical. It is difficult to find materials concerning general topics for teaching reading from the library of Kasetsart University, Kampaengsaen Campus in Nakorn Pathom because it is agriculturally oriented. However, the faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, a new faculty has an abundant amount of computers available at the faculty. Making use of the available resources through the Internet gives the students an opportunity to read a variety of interesting topics.

In addition to practical reasons, there are also more theoretical reasons for using the Internet. The immediate nature of the Internet means that students can get authentic, realistic and up-to-date information, which is a powerful motivational tool. It has been noted by Dickinson (1995) that motivation to learn can be enhanced through the use of appropriate programs. The fact that the students have to retrieve the information themselves also gives their learning a powerful self-directed element.

The Internet also works to prevent cheating. Because there is so much material to choose from, there is far less temptation for students to copy from each other's work. And as they become more proficient in their use of tools such as on-line dictionaries, students are likely to experience more rapid expansion of their vocabulary.

Ultimately, the real value of the Internet is that it gives students greater exposure to English and involves them more in their learning. This in turn will help them to acquire English (Krashen, 1985).

Overview of the course

The technique of integrating the Internet in teaching reading is designed to assist the second year English major students in developing their reading skills. The textbook that is being used is *Reading in Contemporary Culture* (Horning, 1979). As input for extensive reading, students are assigned to find an article from the Internet and then summarize the main points in an Extra-Mural Report Form. The Extra-Mural Reading is worth 20% of the total course score.

Students were given 8 topics on which to find information.¹

1. Fashion
2. Sports or Home Decoration
3. Science
4. Travel
5. Health - Fitness
6. Current Events (News items) or Politics.
7. Environment
8. Short Story.

Introducing Terminology

The Internet is still a relatively new innovation, and many students are still unaware of both its potential and how to use it. In an attempt to assist students' understanding of the Internet so that they can use it more efficiently, a short glossary of terms based on Bride (1995) was provided.

Internet	An open world - wide communications network, linking together countless thousands of computer network, through a mixture of private and public telephone lines.
WWW	The abbreviation form for World Wide Web. The Web, as it is called, is the part of the Internet that contains hypertext links. The links which are usually underlined

	and highlighted, can be clicked and then will take you to other pages related to the topic you are looking for.
Nontri	The local network of Kasetsart University linked into the Internet via Telnet.
Netscape	A Web browser that has icons and dialog boxes called open location (for typing Internet addressing e.g. www.yahoo.com , www.gopher.legislate.com or www.cnn.com).
URL	Uniform Resource Locator. A standardized and systematic way of identifying information on the Internet. Just start with http:// and follow this with the host-computer address such as www.ku.ac.th . You can type capital or lower-case letters (WWW. or www.). Remember for e-mail after the @ only lower-case letters are usually used, e.g. RogerCallier@loxinfo.co.th .
Gopher	Another part of the Internet. It is menu based but does not have hyperlinks.
Search engines	E.g. www.yahoo.com , www.dogpile.com , or www.infoseek.com . They are designed to search the Web for sites and pages that have the information you are looking for. You can type your search using key words e.g. health.
Hyperlinks	These appear in the text as an underlined word or phrase. Hyperlink phrases have attached to them the URL of another page. Clicking on the phrase or image makes the web browser connected to the linked page.

Introducing Procedures for Using the Internet

Mastering some of the terminology is essential, but it is not the whole story. Procedures for accessing the Internet are also vital for smooth operation. To further help students, the following list of necessary procedures which students should perform in order to access the information they require was provided.

1. Turn on the computer and after Window 95 has been loaded, move the cursor to the Netscape icon and then double click the mouse.
2. When the Kasetsart University homepage (Nontri Network) appears, click on the file button at the top of the page and then look for location. In the location box, you will see the URL for <http://www.ku.ac.th>.

3. In the location dialog box, type www.yahoo.com. Then press enter on the keyboard.
4. When the Yahoo homepage appears, point the cursor at News and Media and click. Wait a few minutes, and the homepage of News and Media appears. Then scroll down until you see the magazine category, and click on this. The magazine page will show. Then you need to scroll down until you find the magazine category that interests you, e.g. Society and Culture.
5. Choose a suitable topic and read it on-line or copy it onto a diskette or print the article from the web page. Then use the data to complete the Extra-Mural Report Form.
6. Hand in the Report Form along with a printout of the article.

Guiding Students' Use of the Internet

Extra-Mural Reading was an assignment for students to do outside the classroom, i.e. in the student's own time as homework for a credit type activity. The objective of the Extra-Mural Reading is for students to read authentic texts and skim them to find the main idea. The authentic texts found on the Internet are beneficial to students because the information is current, easy to use and relatively cheap. Students can access a great deal more material without paying lots of money. The Internet also helps the students to learn to skim because there is a vast amount of materials available and they don't have time to read all the material available in detail. Hence, they will improve their ability to skim as a practical measure to cope with all the material available on the Web. While students are surfing the Internet, they may encounter some difficult vocabulary. Tools such as on-line dictionary² and grammar web sites (for example, Dave's ESL Cafe) can be of assistance.

The methods of integrating the Internet with the teaching of reading are:

1. Students are asked to find articles from an on-line Web magazine. When they find a suitable extract for the assigned topic, it should be downloaded to a diskette for later printing.
2. The students have to read the article they have chosen and then summarize or outline the main points of the article. They should also choose six or more new vocabulary items and write them in the space provided for vocabulary on the Report Form.

An example of an uncompleted form is:

Name : _____
Student Number : _____
Extra - Mural Reading Exercise Number : _____
Source of Reading & Date : _____
Subject : _____
Title of the Reading : _____
Main Points in the Reading :

New Vocabulary in the Reading : (at least 6 words)

Data Collection

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the use of the Internet in the course, completed students' forms, students' diaries and a semi-structured interview were employed. The forms were evaluated by comparing those completed at the beginning of the course with those completed at the end. The diaries provided information on students' feelings and reactions during the course and the interviews supplied information from the students at the end of the course, under different circumstances.

Findings

Findings from the Extra-Mural Reading Form

This form is used to evaluate the effectiveness of using the Internet to develop students' reading skills. The form that the students completed was graded in terms of the information presented and covered in the main points of the text. In addition, students were expected to obtain the right meaning of the new vocabulary. If the forms of most students show improvement, this suggests that their reading abilities have improved and perhaps that the approach used is effective. Following are two copies of completed forms. The first copy is the form completed by the student in the first week of the course and the second copy was completed in the last week of the course.

The first copy:

Name: XX

Student Number: X

Extra - Mural Reading Exercise Number: 1

Source of Reading & Date: www.travelthai.com, 15/7/42

Subject: Travel

Title of Reading: Kanchanaburi

Main Points in the Reading: Kanchanaburi is one of the famous province in Thailand because of many things such as: rugged landscape, dense tropical vegetation, the bordering the Burmese highlands, the province's WWII infamy as the site of the Death Railway, and history. There is a variety of tour and trekking available at Kanchanaburi.

New Vocabulary in the Reading: (at least 6 words)

1. rugged (adj.) strong and not easily broken; designed to be used in severe conditions, bad weather, etc.
2. landscape (n.) a view across an area of land.
3. vegetation (n.) the plants, flowers, trees that grow in a particular area.
4. infamy (n.) the state of being infamous.
5. memorial (n.) a structure built in order to remind people of a famous person or event.
6. sapphire (n.) a blue precious stone.
7. rubies (n.) the dark red jewel.
8. pagodas (n.) a tall, ornately decorated building which is used for religious purposes, esp. by Buddhists.
9. excursions (n.) short journey, esp. one that has been organized for a particular reason.
10. guesthouses (n.) the small hotel.
11. trek (n.) a long hard journey, esp. on foot.
12. strategic (adj.) used to describe something that gives a country or an army a military advantage.
13. episode (n.) an important or memorable event.
14. Neolithic (adj.) belonging to the period when people first started farming.
15. artifact (n.) an ornament, tool, or other object made by a human being.

The second copy:

Name: XX

Student Number: X

Extra - Mural Reading Exercise Number: 8

Source of Reading & Date: www.cnn.com, 16/9/42

Subject: Economic

Title of Reading: Credit Cards Hit by Y2K Glitch

Main Points in the Reading: Credit companies are warning consumers that their credit cards might get charged more than once because some merchants failed to update computer software for the year 2000.

New Vocabulary in the Reading : (at least 6 words)

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| 1. transaction (n.) | an occasion when a company buys or sells something, or provides a service for someone. |
| 2. culprit (n.) | the reason for a particular problem or difficulty. |
| 3. glitch (n.) | a small problem that prevents something for working correctly. |
| 4. debit (v.) | to take money out of a bank account. |
| 5. outdated (adj.) | no longer useful or modern. |
| 6. bug (n.) | a small mistake in a computer program that stops it from working correctly. |

The first copy shows that student did not comprehend the main idea of the material because the student's summary does not cover the main points. In addition, the student misunderstood some words, such as rugged, and infamy. The second copy shows that the student's reading comprehension had developed because she could summarize the main points and she also gave the correct meaning of all new words. Although these data are clearly not conclusive, they do suggest that the use of the Internet benefited the student's reading.

Findings from the students' diaries

In addition to looking at students' finished products, we can also gain more qualitative data by examining their diaries. The following are some quotes from students' diaries providing evidence of their positive attitudes towards using the Internet:

"I had a lot of fun when the teacher asked me to surf for topics that I was interested in. I really enjoyed searching for and reading them."

“Using the Internet in teaching reading makes me want to find out more information. This motivates me to read more.”

“I think it is good to use the Internet in teaching reading because information gained from the Internet is interesting. The Internet seems to be a great library for me to access and read online. I can read information from the past to present. It really makes me feel good while reading it because the letters can move and there are color. I can practice reading about news, health, science etc. without paying any money.”

“I always find free time to go to the Faculty Computer Operation Center to read about news and sports.”

The students' diaries above show that the students like the technique of using the Internet as an integral part of their reading course because it can motivate them to search for more information. This suggests that they are likely to read more in order to know what is going on around the world.

The following students' diaries show that using the Internet may also be an effective technique for building up students' reading skills and enriching their vocabulary.

“It helps me to improve my knowledge of vocabulary and reading skills.”

“I learn new vocabulary every week. Now I spend less time in reading.”

Furthermore, the following students' diaries show that their reading ability has developed by using this approach.

“As I was assigned to find topics from the Internet to read and summarize in the Extra-Mural Reading every week, I think I can read faster and also I know more vocabulary, and I have also increased my general knowledge.”

“Though some stories that I read are long and difficult, I still keep on reading them. Reading a story on-line gives me information which I have never known and teaches me more

about other people's ideas. It broadens my knowledge and vocabulary."

Finally, the following extract shows students' improved attitudes towards the reading course.

"I enjoyed studying this reading course because it is not boring. In the past, the reading course I took was quite boring and dull. I was asked to read an assigned textbook or the teacher's handouts."

The information gained from the students' diaries suggests that the students viewed the use of the Internet positively. They enjoyed the work, their motivation was increased, the Internet provided a highly effective learning environment, and they could feel that they were not only improving their language skills but their general knowledge as well.

Findings from the semi-structured interview

To provide further support, interviews were also conducted. All twenty-eight students said that they liked the technique of integrating the Internet with a reading course. They also felt that the Internet helped them develop their reading skills.

The following are summaries of the students' stated reasons for both positive and negative aspects of using the Internet as a learning tool. Extracts showing a positive response include:

"I can choose articles that interest me and work at my own pace."

"I can get a lot of knowledge from web sites and the information is both up to date and useful."

"I feel that it is very interesting. It is a new teaching technique that makes me feel alert to study."

However, one extract also highlights a negative aspect of using the Internet:

"I don't have my own PC and I have to use the faculty computer. Sometimes the computer doesn't work well. I

mean it is so slow that I think that I'm wasting my time while I wait to be connected."

The information provided by the interviews appears largely to echo the students' diaries, although they do introduce some negative sides of the course. Overall, however, the reaction seems positive.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results from the students completed forms, the students' diaries and the interviews show that the students strongly believe that the technique of utilizing the Internet as an integral part of a reading course enables them to develop their reading skills in terms of increasing their motivation, enriching their vocabulary, and promoting a positive attitude towards reading. All of them felt that this technique helped them learn in an environment better than that in their normal English class.

This technique has many advantages. The Internet offers a variety of topics for students and it is motivating. The students have the chance to learn information relating to their individual interests and needs, e.g. knowledge of health, sports, fashion etc. The fact that the students themselves were able to perceive such advantages created intrinsic motivation. Through the Internet, students are exposed to authentic language that is constantly updated. The Internet also enhances students' autonomy by giving them the opportunity to manage their own learning. The only downside is that of time constraint if the computers are down or very busy, but this one negative factor is surely far outweighed by the positive aspects of the use of the World Wide Web in teaching.

Notes

- 1 Nos. 1 - 7 can be found in magazines on the Web part of the Internet via Netscape and Yahoo. No. 8 will be found on Gopher which is reached by way of Netscape open location dialog box and typing `gopher://gopher.tc.umn.edu`. The gopher menu will then appear. Students can also find classic short stories on the Web by opening the location dialog box and typing `www.bnl.com/shorts/`.
- 2 If the students are having problems understanding some words as they read, they can open an on-line Dictionary, such as `www.m-w.com` of Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary to check meaning of unknown words.

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