Essential Skills in CALL Classes: Enhancing Searching and Language Skills

Haslina Hassan and Mohaida Mohin
International Islamic University Malaysia

Introduction

*I*n the quest of making learning more relevant in the contemporary era of information and communication technology, the Internet is considered a valuable resource to both language teachers and learners in computer assisted language learning (CALL) contexts (Singhal, 1997). The experience with the Internet; however, can be discouraging and often highly disorienting to novices and can be quite a challenge even to more experienced users (Rubenking, 2000). Among the students' complaints about web-based learning activities were that they took too long to accomplish, students got lost and they felt overwhelmed (Lee, 1998, Osuna and Meskill, 1998, cited in Brandl, 2002).

Locating the right information does not only require knowledge of how to search but also knowledge of the language (Coulson et al., 2003; Rupert, 2007). It has been reported that the lack of training can make it difficult to implement the Internet in language classroom activities (Singhal, 1997; Fidel et al., 1999; Nahl and Havada, 1996, Nueman, 1993, cited in Brandl, 2002).

Among other factors that led to the problem of implementing the activities was the difficulty in forming effective queries (Hill and Hannafin, 1997). To perform effective queries, the students have to use their existing vocabulary knowledge in the preparation of keywords, which will be used later as "search terms" (Rupert, 2007). Not knowing the right keywords as "search terms" might make finding the information in the Internet a frustrating experience (Laverty, 1998).

As far as second language learners are concerned, the Internet seems to pose more challenges to them. When the Internet based-activities are incorporated into the classroom activity, not only are the students expected to know how to access and pick up the information they need from the overwhelming amount that is there, but they are also learning a new language (Chafe, 1999; Chun and Plass, 1996). This challenge coupled with inability to select information related to the classroom activity could create a negative experience dealing with the Internet. It is more challenging when the Internet-based activities are done in an Arabic for Foreign Language Learning class.

As such, this study is an attempt to investigate the appropriate Internet searching skills adopted by students majoring in Arabic Language and Literature at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Research Questions

1. Is a lack of internet search skill the only factor contributing to students' inability to get the accurate information required?
2. Is limited language proficiency a barrier for students to do effective searching?

Methodology

The research in this study involved 43 participants who were enrolled in the "Computer Application in Language and Literature" course offered by the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, IIUM. One of the tasks in this course mainly deals with getting information from the Internet. Prior to assigning the given task, search strategies were taught to the students. This is necessary as engaging the students in such activities require a variety of searching skills (Brandl, 2002). The strategies taught to the students include using:

"search engine", "meta search engine", "cached", "advanced search", "similar pages" and "search syntax" like "+", "-", "AND", "OR".

The students were asked to retrieve a website on one of the international conferences on computer and Arabic language, which will take place in November 2007 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. One of the conference's sub-themes is "Machine Translation". It should be noted here that the exercise assigned to the students was written in Arabic language which went as follows:

((سمعتَ عن مؤتمر عالمي حول الكمبيوتر واللغة العربية، والذي سينعقد في نوفمبر 2007 بمدينة الرياض. ومن الموضوعات التي سوف تناقش فيه "الترجمة الآلية". قم بالبحث عن تفاصل المؤتمر من الويب.))

In this particular exercise, the students were required to answer the following questions:
- What is the full title of the conference?
- What are the sub themes of the conference?
- What are the important dates in the website of the conference? (For example, the submission dates for the abstract and full paper and the date of the conference itself.)

The instruments used in gathering the data include a set of questionnaires, interview and classroom observation. The questionnaires were distributed to capture possible steps taken by the students in their attempt to complete the Internet-based tasks assigned. The data obtained was analysed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with groups of two or three students during the two-week period when the students were in the process of completing the given tasks.

This procedure was taken in order to get a sense of how the students were progressing and the difficulties they might be encountering while completing the given tasks.

Findings

Findings for research question 1

The data revealed 67.5 per cent of the participants perceived the "lack of sufficient search skill" as a factor leading to their inability in getting the information. Furthermore, 76.8 per cent of the participants were found to fail in typing the correct and precise "keywords" and "phrases" given by the researcher. Examples of "keywords" taken from the question would be: مؤتمر (conference), عالمي (international), الكمبيوتر (computer), الرياض (Riyadh). And examplse of "phrases" extracted from the question were: مؤتمر عالمي (international conference), الترجمة الآلية (machine translation).

Further investigation in testing the students' ability in using the "advanced search" skills demonstrated that 88.4 per cent of them knew how to use "cached". This would help the students in getting the precise information in a shorter period of time. They used "+" sign while defining the "search terms". Moreover, 95.4 per cent of them added the "+" sign more than once to narrow down the search result. The data showed that 63 per cent of the participants attempted to answer the three questions posed to them by using "advanced search", but failed to get the correct answer.

Findings for research question 2

Some of the participants (37.2 per cent) did not attempt to change the words throughout the exercise and depended on the original words and phrases given in the question. Examples of the commonly used original words from the assigned text were: مؤتمر (conference), عالمي (international), الكمبيوتر (computer). This showed that they did not have the correct synonyms and did not have sufficient vocabulary.

This finding is supported by a study carried out by Banwell and Gannon-Leary (2000) who discovered that the students seemed to be disinterested or unwilling to change their current "information-seeking behaviour" patterns.

Most of the participants (86 per cent) admitted that if they spelt the "keywords" wrongly, the chance to get relevant information was very slim. It was discovered that when the article ال for certain Arabic nouns like الرياض (Riyadh) was omitted, there were no hits at all giving the information.

Conclusion

General assumptions that learners are familiar with searching for information in the Internet, and that they know how to do so efficiently must be avoided (Brandl, 2002). Formal "searching skills" training must be incorporated into the curriculum and not as an isolated topic (Fidel at el., 1999). Besides, having sufficient internet search skill does not guarantee the ability to locate the right information

required, searchers must possess certain language proficiency in the language the search is formed. The instructors must point out certain linguistic features belong to the language that the search is formed. For instance, certain Arabic nouns are by nature prefixed with the article ال. The failure of doing so may result in getting irrelevant information. This uniqueness must be clearly emphasised especially to non-Arabic native speakers. Thus, when incorporating Internet-based activities in a language classroom teachers and students alike should think positively in trying to accomplish the tasks. Teachers will not only fulfil their learning outcomes and at the same time the students should enjoy completing their tasks.

References

Banwell, L. and Gannon-Leary, P. (2000). JUBILEE: Monitoring user information behaviour in the electronic age. *OCLC Systems and Services*, 16 (4).

Brandl, K. (2002). Integrating internet-based reading materials into the foreign language curriculum: From teacher- to student-centered approaches. *Language Learning & Technology*, 6(3): 87-107. Retrieved 15 August 2007 from http://llt.msu.edu/vol6num3/brandl/

Chafe, A. (1999). *Effective use of the internet in second language education: Guidelines for teachers*. Retrieved 21 August 2007 from http://www.cdli.ca/~achafe/Internetinclassroom.html

Chun, D. M. and Plass, J. L. (1996). Effects of multimedia annotations on vocabulary acquisition. *Modern Language Journal*, 80:183-198.

Coulson, G., Ray, K. and Banwell, L. (2003). The need for a converged approach to EIS provision? Evidence from the JUBILEE project, *Library Review*, 52 (8/9) 438-444.

Hill, J. R. and Hannafin, M. J. (1997). Cognitive strategies and learning from the World Wide Web. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 45, 37-64. Retrieved 15 August 2007 from http://www.springerlink.com/content/g724346256703364/fulltext.pdf

Laverty, C. (1998). Common Student Problems. In Kirsten, L. (2003) *Teaching search engines to ESL students: Avoiding the avalanche*. The Internet TESL Journal, 11(6). Retrieved 15 August 2007 from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Lincoln-SearchEngines/

Rubenking, N. (2000, August). Better Internet searching, PC Magazine, 19, 119. In R. Scott Auble and David L. Delongchamp, *Teaching internet search strategies using critical thinking skills*. Retrieved 31 August 2007 from http://imet.csus.edu/imet1/scotty/research/litreview.htm

Rupert, H. (2007). Teaching EFL/ESL students how to use search engines and develop their English. *The Internet TESL Journal*. Retrieved 15 August 2007 from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Herington-SearchEngines.html

Singhal, M. (1997). The Internet and foreign language education: Benefits and challenges. *The Internet TESL Journal*, No. 6, June 1997. Retrieved 17 August 2007 from http://iteslj.org/Articles/Singhal-Internet.html