Thonburi University Students' Perceptions of Learning English from the Internet Websites

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Abstract

Technology, especially the emergence of computer with the internet, has created the possibility for new ways of learning and teaching. In order to make the best use of this new methodology of online teaching and learning it is considered necessary to have a better understanding of learners' perceptions and their implications for these new teaching and learning models. This study investigated the potential role of internet as a means to supplement in - class instruction. The study also aims to find out how teachers could effectively help students learn English through ESL/ EFL websites already available on the internet. The study was made by giving online homework assignments to 50 students studying English with the researcher in a private University in Bangkok. Thereafter, a survey of their perceptions was made by means of a questionnaire administered in the classroom after the homework assignment was handed to the teacher cum researcher.

Many of the students perceived that they have gained confidence in their abilities as an independent learner. In spite of it, many of the students perceived that the presence of the instructor was necessary for online learning to be more successful.

Introduction

Globalization and societal changes require continuous learning and exchange of knowledge and skills for career development, upward mobility, professional and personal reasons and job security (Eastmond, 1998). Both traditional and nontraditional students may enroll in online courses that allow them to pursue education at their convenience. The success of online learning depends on motivation and application of technology (Huebner & Wier, 2001). Therefore, technology, especially the emergence of computer with the internet, is affecting every aspect of communication and education in the contemporary world and changing the ways we teach them. Learners' interest to learning languages has been enforced by the availability of the Internet, which provides easy access to every possible kind of information and serves as an effective tool to facilitate learning (Kaliauskiene, G. 2003).

The use of online learning is a modern educational means which has been expanding rapidly. In many parts of the world, public and private institutions of higher learning are opting for online learning as a new approach to deliver instructions (Harasim et al 1997; Haughey and Anderson, 1998); The Internet presents a reliable and continuously updated material for online learning. It provides both of general and specific interest materials that are invaluable to learners. The Internet can serve as a teaching medium, which, not only contain texts but also pictures, quizzes, crosswords, sounds, music and films. The web-assisted lessons may supplement learning grammar and vocabulary at learner's own pace as a self-study activity. There are a number of free (of charge) websites that provide such autonomy to

learners. Learners may practice grammatical structures, improve their listening and reading comprehension, build up their vocabulary (Krajka & Grudzinska, 2002).

Pollard (1997: 4) rightly says, "teaching is a complex and highly skilled activity which, above all, requires classroom teachers to exercise judgement in deciding how to act". To make proper judgements requires that teachers think about their teaching. He (Ibid) continues to explain that " reflective teaching is seen as a process through which the capacity to make such professional judgements can be developed and maintained." Conscientous teachers must not only think about their teaching, but also study what they and their students have been doing in the classroom and its effect on the learning environment. Finally, they must decide what improvements if any need to be made and how to make them. This study has been made to that end (Messerklinger, Josef 2003:115).

With online learning, students control when, where and what they learn as well as how often and how quickly- and this level of control is what creates satisfied students. Learning varies with each individual, as do the preferences for the methods used to learn. Given the appropriate tools, students can become learners with a passion of knowledge. The challenge for educators is therefore the same as it has always been: how to help students learn (Linda, Peters 2001).

Purpose of the Study

From a review of literatures, there emerge a few common guidelines for teaching English on the Internet from the investigation of experiences of teachers around the world (Warschauer, 1997). The guidelines can be briefly explained under the following few headlines:

 Goals: Whatever reasons teachers have for teaching language via the web, the first important point is to clarify the goals for using the internet, e.g., teach writing, revise vocabulary or grammar, prepare projects etc.

Integration: The second important point is integration of online activities into the course curriculum ' rather than adding these on top of the rest of the classroom activities in a disconnected fashion.'

Provide Support : The third important point is that teachers have to provide support, i.e. personal help to learners during activities, assigning students to work in pairs or groups.

With all these features being reviewed, the research was undertaken with the following research questions:

1. What strategies used by the teachers to facilitate learning through ESL websites do students find useful
2. What problems and difficulties do students encounter when they use these teacher selected websites?

In other words, the present research investigated learning strategies through the effectiveness of learning English through certain ESL/ EFL websites. The research was carried out with the following objectives as:

1) to find out how teachers could effectively help students learn English through ESL/ EFL websites already available on the internet; and

2) to find out how students perceived learning English through these teacher selected websites.

Methodology

The present study employed descriptive research design. It describes the data and characteristics about what is being studied. The universe of the present study is the total number of students studying English in all departments belonging to various

faculties of Thonburi University, which is located at 110 Phetkasem Road, Nongkaem, Bangkok. The universe of the present study is 915 students studying English in various departments under various faculties in Thonburi University, with different course of English.

With regard to sampling, the present study used purposive opportunistic sampling, where the researcher select useful cases, that is, the respondents were selected from the classroom of the researcher. There were three groups of students engaged by the researcher during the term November 2007 to March 2008 such as: Group 1- IE 1, Group II – EE 1, ME 1 and Group III - EER 1, MER 1, IER 1. The sample size of the present study was 50 students from Faculty of Engineering. These 50 students were present on the day the questionnaire was administered. Absentees and no response were excluded from analysis.

The data was collected with the help of administering a questionnaire from the classes engaged by the researcher at the time of the research. The questionnaire instructions and questions were presented from English to Thai so as to make the students able to answer it easily. It was translated from English to Thai by a Thai English teacher. While translating the questionnaire from English to Thai, care was taken so as to make sure that the original sense and objectives of the research data were not changed. The questionnaire was administered in the classroom on the last day the last assignment was collected. It took about 15 minutes for a questionnaire to be completed by each student respondents. All the assignments were later on marked, returned to the students, and discussed in the next class after the students completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained multiple choice types, Likert –scale – type items, consisting of a five point – scale- strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree and strongly agree

and short answer questions adapted from Kung, S.C & Chuo, I . (2002) and Stepp – Greany (2002). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part concentrated on the personal data, that is, the socio-economic background of the respondents. The socio-economic background includes variables such as gender, age, type of schooling and family, family income and specific details about them. The second part of the questionnaire deals with the nature of the students' access to the computer and their habits, reasons and other details of using internet such as difficulties and problems encountered when completing web assignments. The third part of the questionnaire is set on the students' overall perception of learning English from the internet. In addition, observational methods were also used.

After collecting the data, the data was coded and entered in the computer. Thereafter, the data was classified accordingly for different response categories. Hand tabulation was made thereafter accordingly. The study employed descriptive statistical analysis such as measures of central tendency, that is, mean and percentages.

With regard to the procedure of online activities, each group of student was given 60 minutes training session at the computer lab as how to navigate computer, search and do the online exercise or quiz from certain websites selected by the researcher. During the training session, the students were asked to work in pairs on the computers at the library and in the computer lab. The training session aimed to introduce students to the computer and to the selected websites so that the students could use to practice their language skills on their own. After the training session the students were given two weeks to complete a series of homework activities using the websites presented after the training session. These activities assigned to the

students were a part of their English course syllabus. The activities included exercises on prefixes, suffixes, parts of speech, word formation with different parts of speech by means of suffix such as noun, adjective, verbs, spelling, reading, games, scrambled letters and writing practice. The assignments consisted of true or false, multiple choice, matching or short answer questions. The students handed the assignment to the instructor in the form of a report neatly printed and binded after about two weeks of the training session. About two or three students worked together in group for one assignment. . They were assured that they would be given 10 marks for handling the assignment so as to make sure that they complete the assignment in time.

Limitations of the Study

The study is not without limitations. It is limited to the Faculty of Engineering only. In addition the study is more descriptive than being statistical and also because of the nature of the data, the results may not be generalized.

Results & Discussion

The major findings of the study are:
Students'Socio-Economic Background

Most of the respondents were from the age group of 19 to 21 years. The mean age of the students' respondents was 19.89 years. Most of the respondents were male. More than 50 percent of the students' respondents had schooling from government school. Majority of the students were living in a nuclear family group of 1 to 4 persons in their household. A high proportion of the students included in the study were from the low income group family earning less than 10,000 Baht per month. Second high in percentage were those students who were from the middle family income group earning 10,000 to 20,000 Baht per month. With regard to the earners in the household or family of the students included in the study, most of the earners were both father and mother. Almost all the students included in the study never have attended any language or special class to improve their English skills. Majority of the students did not have a computer that can connect to the internet. Majority of the students included in the study used the internet on University computers. Only a few has personnel computers while some students used internet in internet café. Almost all the students included in the study have knowledge of how to use the internet. A negligible proportion of the students did not have knowledge on how to use the internet. Majority of the students used the internet quite often where the frequency of usage is more than three times a week. Most of the students spent a considerable amount of time, at least two hours, on the internet every time when they logged on the internet. Majority of the respondents have never visited the ESL websites before the teacher introduced it to them. Most of the students found learning English using internet to be boring.

Difficulties and Problems Encountered

Regarding the difficulties and problems encountered by the students' respondents, most of them found the instruction in English of doing the online exercise, quiz or activities, difficult to understand to them. With regard to the benefits of learning English from the internet, most of the students included in the study considered that it makes learning English to be easier. Lastly, with regard to the mode of online learning, most of the students included in the study preferred to learn in group.

Students' Perceptions of Teaching Strategies Used

With regard to the students' perceptions of the teaching strategies used, more than half of the total students included in the study perceived that the teacher's introduction to the content of the websites was necessary. Majority of them felt that they needed instructions for online navigation. A high proportion of the students perceived the necessity of the teachers' recommendations on useful websites for learning English from the internet. Three – fourths of the students perceived the necessity of the presence of the instructor while learning English from the internet so as to facilitate and help them. More than half of the total students perceived that the homework assignment using websites was effective. More than half of the total students could not understand clearly about the instruction in online navigation and the introduction to the contents of the selected websites.

Overall Perceptions of Using the Internet to learn English

With regard to the students' overall perceptions of using the internet to learn English, majority of the students perceived affirmatively that the overall experience in the computer lab made English a more interesting course. A high proportion perceived positively that the internet is an effective way to learn English. Majority of the students perceived positively that the information from the internet activities in the selected websites contributed greatly to their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. Three – fourths of the total students included in the study perceived affirmatively that they gained technical skills on the computer as a result of learning English from the internet. Many students perceived that they gained confidence in their abilities to use computer technology with an internet connection for learning English successfully.

With regard to the problems and difficulties encountered by the students when they were using the internet, the main problem perceived was firstly the initial frustration of having various ESL/EFL websites for learning English. Secondly, they got disconnected when downloading the activities and it was too slow. Thirdly, some of them did not understand instructions on the websites.

Students' Perceptions of the Appropriateness of the Program

With regard to the students' perceptions of the appropriateness of the program, many of them perceived appropriate towards it especially its functions in supplementing in – class instruction. In addition, they perceived affirmatively that they learned a lot from the internet assignment and activities and also believed that the program was appropriately related to the course content. The students firmly perceived that their reading, listening, writing and grammar skills in English improved as a result of the internet assignment. Many of the students enjoyed the internet activities and the homework assignment. Lastly, majority of the students perceived that they have learned a lot from the internet assignment and activities.

Likelihood of Further Learning through ESL / EFL Websites

With regard to the likelihood of further learning through ESL / EFL websites, almost three-fourths of the students hoped the teacher can recommend more websites for learning English. Many of the students perceived that they would use the recommended websites even if the teacher does not assign homework. More than half of the students perceived that they would look for more ESL / EFL websites by themselves.

Many of the students perceived that they have gained confidence in their abilities as an independent learner. More than half of the total students perceived that the presence of the instructor was necessary.

Conclusion

From the above findings it may be concluded that many of the students used the internet necessarily and favorably and this large number of students accessing the internet coupled with recent explosion of information resources on the internet, may have considerable implications for teaching, learning and research. Teachers and students are depending more and more on the internet for their various educational purposes. The present study is, therefore, an attempt to assess the perceptions of the students so as to find the effectiveness of the Internet as an educational tool, and what role it actually plays in the educational system with special reference to the engineering students of Thonburi University. The findings indicate that despite the variety of resources available on the World Wide Web, many EFL students do not use websites in their language learning process because of the linguistic complexity of materials and inability to assess the relevant materials easily. Therefore, it can be concluded that the students cannot be autonomous learner. The internet is so vast, therefore, the students need to be guided in using and finding useful resources from the World Wide Web. As their teachers, we should guide and help them to acquire these skills and continue to look for innovative ways to use technology to enrich the learning experience of our students. The study offered a practical way of using internet resources for foreign language learning. The important factors for successful learning online are learners' command of computer skills, experience in assessing information from the internet websites and good skills in English so as to be able to follow the online instruction. In addition, this study is a mini program of learning English from the internet sources so as to make the students familiarize with ESL/EFL resources on the World Wide Web. From the results of this study, it can be concluded that students consider the internet as a useful tool for learning, searching, finding information and for leisure activities. The students were satisfied to learn English through the teacher recommended ESL/ EFL websites. But they are unlikely to study alone since they needed instructions where the sites are and in how to use those materials available on the various websites. This suggests the importance of guiding the students in the use of internet resources. The strategies used by the teacher in the present study such as access to computer, recommendation of useful websites, training on how to do the online quiz, instruction in online navigation and giving homework assignment were helpful and appropriate for learning English. Even though the students perceived affirmatively about the effectiveness of learning through ESL / EFL websites, they were not sure whether they would go for a regular class or a computer assisted class if they were given a choice. From the analysis of data, it can be concluded that the teachers has to recommend more websites to the students for learning English so that the students can select which is easy to learn, navigate and follow the instructions. The results highlighted that the students perceived to use the internet for learning English selectively and with an aim and purpose of them.

These findings suggested that students' perception towards self-learning is affirmative if given a guidance and instruction but otherwise passive since they

need the presence of instructor while learning English from the internet. That means they have doubts of their abilities for learning without the guidance of instructor. They found internet as the supplemental mode of learning to be interesting and wanted more recommended sites by the teachers, but are not likely to put more times on these sites on their own unless they are told what to do with the information on the sites.

Implications

The Internet is a valuable tool for English teaching. Yet the Internet, like other forms of technology, will not itself solve problems. It will be up to us as instructors to develop the right ways of using the Internet based on our general goals, our teaching style and approach, an analysis of our students' needs, and the technological tools we have at hand. Given this, there are several steps to consider before using the internet in our class. The implications from the study suggested that teaching methodologies and strategies used, the classroom environment, the school social environment, and the family background could influence students' perceptions of and attitude towards learning English (Chee, Choy Siew et al, 2002).

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