Learning how to use Internet resources to write a "review of the literature"

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Pedagogical context

ICT was used in a language course plus tutorials
The target group was a group of graduate students at a French university-level engineering school for the food industry. They were in the section that specializes in food processing in hot regions
The aim of the course The aim of this course module was to provide guidance to graduate students from French-speaking countries, (French overseas territories, the Caribbean, Africa, the Near and Middle East) in how to identify and select useful web sites in English to compile a "review of the literature". Unlike some of their colleagues from industrialised countries, the students who signed up for this module had not previously had free access to the Internet
The **target language** was: English   **What was the purpose of each language?** English is the main language for scientific communication (publications, congresses, etc.).
Further remarks A scientific review of the literature is based on published papers which are available by subscription or on expert data bases. The aim here was not to access top-quality scientific publications, but to work through the procedure of selecting, presenting and justifying the choice of information (in English) to the tutor.

Organisational context

Size of target group: 11 - 20		
Apart from the target group - were **other people** involved? If yes, who?	How many?	To what purpose?
- technician	1	Technical aid when needed
Teaching period		
The ICT module was 10 hours over a 3-month period		
Was distance learning combined with face-to-face instruction? How many hours		

were dedicated to each?
DL: 6 hours   Face to face: 4 hours
Comments: This module was part of a teacher-taught course (3 hours per week over the university year).

Motivation for the use of ICT

The ICT module was based on the use of the Internet. The aim was to encourage students to use it to look for information in the same way they will use expert data bases later on in their careers.

The graduate school had just installed a computer laboratory with permanent access to the Internet. Students immediately started using it for e-mail and to write school papers. In 2000, it had not yet become the only way to submit papers to instructors, some of whom still want paper copies. This is still true at the time of writing, in 2003.

The second aim was to communicate in English with their tutor about the work process. I wanted them to feel comfortable submitting work long before it reached perfection. One of the difficulties facing students used to working in the highly-competitive French academic context is that they feel obliged to wait until what they produce is as good as it can be before handing it in. This makes them very sensitive to suggestions and criticism. By asking them to first choose and justify their choice of web sites, and second to comment the texts they had selected, they were obliged to write the same kind of text they would write in a "real" review but without the emotional pressure.

Description of the course

The **aim** was to use search engines to find information relevant to a given topic on the Internet, to learn to select the "best" (most appropriate) information to support their hypothesis, and to write a justification for their choice, all in English. If there had been more time available, I would have had them write a full (though brief) review at the end. As it was, we got no further than two submissions: first, a list of web sites and the reason for their choice, second, one or more texts with comments (theoretically) explaining how the text supported or contradicted their initial hypothesis.

Teaching methodology used:

During the first teacher-taught session, using a computer and a video projector, I ran through a search for a topic I had chosen (yams, a tropical tuber widely used as a food in developing countries). I used the meta-search engine Copernic and Google. (In fact there are other search engines specifically designed to search expert data bases, but these were not available in the students' computer lab, as access to these data bases is restricted to subscribers.) Students had already chosen a topic for their thesis (in French) and they were encouraged to use the same topic, as they already had some background in the subject and this would help them judge the texts on the Net. I then invited students with the least experience to come up and try a run-through. After two or three had tried, I distributed a print-out of the steps I had gone through and in pairs they started their own searches. I was available to help them if needed.

Subsequently they worked on their own and communicated with me only by e-mail. The

only other time we met face-to-face was at the end of the module when those students who wished presented and commented the results of their work to the whole group.

Teaching materials used:

None. It was "hands-on" learning with peer instruction (some of the students were much more familiar with computers and the Internet and were asked to help the others).

The **technologies** used:

- **Hardware:** desk-top PCs with Internet access.

- **Software:** No educational software. Search engines (google etc.), meta-search engine (Copernic).

I have an ADSL connection at home (where my office is) needed to handle the big files the students sent (sometimes they downloaded much more than they needed).

- e-mail

● **What was successful**

At the time (2001 - 2002) about half the students were not yet at ease using the Internet and felt uncomfortable admitting this in front of their more sophisticated colleagues. What they liked best was the relaxed atmosphere that allowed them to gain experience and confidence without losing face (of course they didn't use this expression when they explained it to me, they said they were happy I made mistakes too). Some of the more experienced students were delighted to "show off" their knowledge. Some of the students were also pleased to use their English to do something "real", in contrast to "traditional" English classes.

● **What was less successful**

The new school server had just been installed and was always breaking down. We wasted a lot of time in the first session in the computer lab. Incidentally, teachers in computer labs need to have eyes in the back of their heads to check students are not visiting "forbidden" sites or dealing with private correspondence.

● **Feedback**

Those who completed their task were happy and proud of themselves. Others didn't bother to finish (this module was not obligatory and was not graded) as the students at this school have an immense amount of work to do and English is not as high on the list of their priorities as scientific subjects.

● **What I would change next time**

As a matter of fact I have not been asked to repeat this module this year, 2002-2003 (the school is undergoing major architectural modifications). When I do it again, I will try to insist on having the time to finish the module correctly (i.e. have a real product). I will try and convince the members of teaching staff concerned to include the English review as part of student's official submissions towards their MSc and grade it accordingly. Though at the time

of writing there is hope, this is not guaranteed to happen (languages are the poor relatives in scientific education).

● **What would you recommend to other professionals in the field**

Students love using the Internet. For the purposes of learning and practising "real" English, it's ideal. The only problem is making sure students don't get bogged down in endless information. The task and the procedure have to be really clear in your mind (and in theirs) and the end product clearly defined.

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Professional background

Profession:
Language teacher, communications trainer, consultant (audits, expertise, teacher training)
My current occupation is teaching graduate students and members of the scientific research community scientific and technical English and communication techniques.
Distance teaching
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