Two reasons L2 students have difficulty searching the web, and, suggestions for teaching students to use search engines effectively.

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The World Wide Web can be an exciting place. It contains a huge amount of information, but for many beginning users, trying to find what they want too often causes frustration and makes them give up. For students whose second language is English, searching the Web or internet, much of it in English, poses even more difficulty. There are 2 reasons why students whose first language is not English may have problems searching the internet. One reason may be a lack of language knowledge, i.e., poor reading and English comprehension skills, and poor vocabulary and word knowledge. Secondly, they may not really understand what to actually do when using a search engine, such as, Altavista, Google or Dogpile to find information.

Using English to search the web requires quite a high level of language skill. Students have difficulty for 2 main reasons. Firstly, they tend not to think about the topic in enough detail before conducting a search. As a result, they may not find enough relevant results to match their searches, leading to a feeling of frustration. Students may need help in using their existing vocabulary knowledge in the preparation of keywords, which can be used as ‘search terms’ about the topic. Secondly, sometimes students can only find limited information about the topic because the ‘keyword (s)’ they use are in a different structure to the ways in which English is typically structured. For example, varying the word order of keywords may produce different results. Compare a search for the topic ‘management and finance courses’ (1 web page found), and ‘finance and management courses (27 web pages found), or ‘black and white’ instead of ‘white and black’. Another language concern is that students may not understand word families and word forms well enough, for example the verb form, ‘manage’ will give different results than the noun form, ‘management’; or students might not think to combine keywords with other words that go together (also known as collocation) for example, combining management systems, or computer management systems. Further, using higher frequency words as keywords may make it easier to find information about a topic. For example, searching for nuclear weapon (6,607 web pages found) instead of the more frequent ‘nuclear weapons (22,475 web pages found) produced different results (Herington, 2002).

Another consideration when searching the web concerns how search engines actually work, and, how to best use them. Search engines are useful particularly when the user does not know on which website the information they require might be located, or have any idea at all as to where to find the information they want. Teel and Gray (2000) define a search engine as “a search tool that collects information from the Web by running an automatic program which visits huge numbers of web pages. It stores this information in a database and searches it by keyword when it receives your search request. It then provides you with a list of sites that include your keyword (s).” (p. 105) Each search engine operates in a slightly different way; searchengine.watch.com explains the particular characteristics of each search engine, but it is not really necessary to
understand in detail how different search engines search. Instead, it is useful if students can distinguish between official webpages or links, as opposed to someone’s personal website. So, when using commercial search engines, it is important to recognize the obvious signs of an unreliable source. Looking at the website address itself is informative. Lincoln (2003) explains the meaning of website address endings very clearly as follows:

.edu - means it is related to educational or research material. However, it could also be a student’s personal webpage.
.gov – means it is usually related to government resources.
.com – used to mean it was related to commercial products, but now it can be either a personal page or a commercial page.

Lincoln (2003) also suggests another “address-related evaluation method” is to look at the server name (p. 3). For example, geocities is a free web host and an address such as www.geocities.com/kblincoln/mossyglenn.html is likely to be just one person’s personal ideas and not an official organization. Angelfire is another free webhost and hometown.aol.com is another webhost where many personal pages can be found.

Skimming and scanning web pages is another vital search skill. Students need to remember to skim and scan constantly, to read much more than just the keywords and to look not only at the top of a page, but also scroll to the bottom, and read the sides. Very often people who are not frequent internet users do not read in this way and it takes time for beginning users to learn to read a webpage well.

Another important thing students must learn to do when searching for academic texts, is to take note of the date or year of posting on the internet and to write down the source, or where the information comes from and find out who wrote the article or designed the page. Sometimes author information is not there, and students should question what this might mean and whether the information is accurate and reliable. Evaluating the quality of information is essential, especially if the information is to be used for academic purposes.

Also, judging the quality of the graphics and layout of a webpage can give an idea of how reliable information might be. According to Lincoln (2003) it is obvious when there are “amateurish graphics or layout” (p 3).

Finally, if a student is unable to find the desired information and webpage results, take a break, then, try a different set of keywords and a few different search engines. If you have been using Google, then try Dogpile or Yahoo. Often is it a good idea to find 2 or 3 good sources of information straight away, rather than getting stuck using just one link.

It is important for students to have a positive experience when learning how to use the internet. With this in mind, students must realize that there are both language skills and search procedure skills they need to acquire in order to use the internet successfully. It is likely that the Web will continue to grow for their academic life and life in general.
Reference List

http://iteslj.org/

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