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BEYOND TEACHER TRANSMISSION AND GOOGLING INFORMATION TO MORE CREATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

As information is readily available online, students can Google and Google Translate perhaps challenging a teacher's classroom role and language awareness. The safety of being a transmitter of knowledge and instructor may be threatened and classrooms could become fossilized as the instant nature of information grows. This conceptual paper will argue that we facilitate modern language learning by stimulating questioning. Tasks may need to include appropriate online searching and a creative inquiry approach to using language and understanding images. This suggests reworking teacher dominance into a facilitator's role.

Digital natives and the Facebook/Instagram/Snapchat generation may want a culture of learning which embraces information flows, while providing tools for English language learning and use in the modern era. Suggestions for engaging learners with contemporary techniques will be shared, even for classrooms in which there is not readily available connectivity. Interactive tasks are part of this paper.

BACKGROUND

Many have access to an enormous range of information as trillions of bytes present themselves to learners through social media and the less ephemeral platform of web sites. Such digital access may threaten the position of teachers as all-knowing transmitters of analogue print- based knowledge (Roberts, 2003). This suggests an educational need to include information processing skills for the vast array of information and disinformation which is present online. It could be argued that classrooms may become fossilised if they are not sites acknowledging the needs of those who were in earlier decades termed 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001). This paper will suggest that going beyond Googling could include raising learners' awareness of processing online information, developing visual literacy and focussing on synthesising skills. The question of defining digital literacy is a useful starting point.

Merchant (2007) argues for a broader definition beyond the skills directly evoked by competencies in being able to use digital platforms. He suggests that 'digital literacy could...be seen as the study of written or symbolic representation that is mediated by new technology. Its prime concern would be the production and consumption of the verbal and symbolic aspect of screen based texts' (Merchant, *ibid*, p.121). He notes that a proliferation of binary 'us and them' definitions may not have enhanced our understanding'. In earlier phases of digital literacy growth, Prensky (2009) described the digital world as a cleavage between 'digital natives' and 'incoming immigrants', yet now the cleavage is more between older users' choice of platforms such as Facebook and the synchronous users of visually- driven platforms such as Instagram and U tube. The huge

proliferation of websites and the extent of global Internet penetration make this dichotomy of digital natives contestable just by statistics of the wide range of users and the scale of Internet penetration. In January 2018 there were 1,805,260,010 websites (<https://news.netcraft.com>) so websites still remain an expanding part of the digital landscape, which this paper will explore.

A complex continuum of users and usage is developing exponentially as many users of digital media blend multiple modes of making meaning. Even defining the making of meaning in new media has been suggested as a new form of literacy. There are many implications for educationalists as digital input expands and it is to this growth that we now turn with the primary focus on websites.

SEEKING INFORMATION

Learners in all disciplines are faced with readily available information on many social media platforms. However, the plethora of information may not be researched or critiqued by users or students with a full awareness of how information is represented or misrepresented. Most substantive information, beyond dominant social interaction is not to be found within popular short text platforms, a situation which has been well described since the wave of SMS texts. Text types of any substantial length and content are often found on websites which by their nature are less transitory and are imbued with a sense of the web site owner's commitment to their online presence. A website requires a financial commitment, registration and is less fleeting than Instagram or Snapchat. Websites are still an important and expanding part of digital literacy and yet in education we seem to neglect the structure of websites and literacy skills, both linguistic and visual, which are needed for information retrieval. We turn firstly to the searching skills based on words.

Information retrieval and seeking relevant facts requires a literacy which can be developed through a searching grammar. One can work with a grammar and vocabulary of searching, assuming one uses a search engine such as the dominant platform of Google, which has incidentally entered the Oxford dictionary as a verb (Heffernan, 2017). Effective searching requires understanding how general the search topic is and so the vocabulary of online searching will link to word classes and how specific a particular topic is. Searching online can be useful as framework for teaching the general or specific nature of vocabulary items. Clearly 'komodo dragon' is a specific descriptive jump from 'Indonesian strange animal'. As with this example, we can build search skills by taking a topic at a general level, (strange animal or reptile) brainstorming words and then grouping in classifications before looking at levels of classification down to our particular interest (for example, the Komodo 'dragon; dangerous local carnivores and so on').

Classification is, of course, the process which Google and Facebook work with as they mine our data. This defining by what the search engine thinks we want and our search can be channelled by how frequently one searches in a particular area of interest. Most search engines such as Google mine the data and will produce what they think you need based on the past search history. The events of early 2018 make it clear the data mining by both Facebook and Google can target online users' interests and channel their behaviours to profit-generating areas tailored to the users' areas of concern .and more dangerously, the providers' interests (Naughton, 2018). Netizens may be channelled to searching more and more in narrowing areas of interest as they process more about shrinking domains of knowledge with choices determined by embedded algorithms. There is a conceptual framework being created by our searching which could mean we

search repeatedly in narrowing areas of knowledge. Many users may not be aware of this dynamic of data mining but, it does suggest a need for thinking creatively and generating vocabulary in a free thinking, open manner. However, it is clear that specificity of searches speeds up the online experience.

Being specific with the correct vocabulary can make searching more efficient; as with quotes for the exact phrase, being site specific as in “Google site: Sunway University” and using the term “define”. This writer has found very few schools or universities who focus on the importance of using the simple search grammar and highlighting the importance of specific vocabulary choice. This grammar of searching is explained clearly online, (<https://www.lifehack.org/articles/technology/20-tips-use-google-search-efficiently.html>.) and elsewhere. The choice of keywords and the well-structured question are an important starting point.

A technique which this writer has found useful is to begin with a simple question or keyword which is the basis or main topic of the online search. This is often very general when working with English as an Additional Language learners and may require modelling of different types of questions, as well as brainstorming related vocabulary. When developing critical online searching we may need to work with the cultural dynamics in which questioning may be seen as questioning a person, rather than pursuing ideas. Posing questions may in itself not be part of classroom dynamics in some learning cultures such as that of Malaysia with which this writer is most familiar (Hall, 2015). However, the information learners are able to gain both online and off line as they build language skills will depend on developing a sense of curiosity and a desire for inquiry. With this in mind, a teacher can model and facilitate other related questions about the topic in the class. As this process is occurring, the teacher, as a facilitator of learning can add questions, thereby modelling the role of the teacher as a questioning, ongoing learner rather than a transmitter of knowledge (Freeman, 2002).

Information retrieval online is clearly related to how questions are formed, but often learners just want the quick method of typing in a key word. As a facilitator of learning our role should also include an openness to accept learner-generated questions which may seem like outliers such as “Did the Komodo dragons swim from Java?” Following discussion of a topic there may be many sub topics for which learners can identify a key noun, phrase or specific questions. Before searching, learners may want to enhance their vocabulary through noting how their newly acquired words may have different meanings in the first language, beginning an understanding of how language and concepts are intertwined.

Fellow educators, I interrupt this plenary in the transmission of information mode, as I have stated that seeking information through questioning is important. It would be wrong of me to suggest that as teachers we should facilitate learning without doing the same. We will now do a reflective task. This task is based on the reality of classrooms in that we all face challenges, such as getting learners to question and stimulating talk, as well as motivational differences. If your phone has mobile data plan, please turn it on. I often teach with a phones on and phones off signal so this is mine.

Reflecting on our own classroom we will start with a classroom challenge

Please do the first two stages individually, then the next steps in a pair.

Reflective Task 1:

- **Reflect on a classroom challenge**
- **Write or type six related words- just words**
- **Add the questioning word- wh question**
- **Assess on-line answers and sources**
- **Choose one web site- why**
- **Analyse why this is a useful source of information**
- **Share with a partner**

The choice of a web site which you just looked at may not just involve the language and information, as a sense of the authenticity of the site may relate to how it appears. While searching online most people are looking at the visuals of a website as well as reading. Considerable design thinking goes into making sure that a reader stays on a page and follows calls to action which a website designer has incorporated. It could be argued that for many the appeal of a website and its authenticity lie as much in the visual appeal, as in the written data. Preliminary research by this writer suggests that tertiary level learners make many of their decisions about the authenticity of a website due to its layout and visual arrangement. This suggests that visual literacy is an important part of searching and understanding the authenticity and usefulness of online resources. It is to the concept of visual literacy that we now turn.

Seeking online information and seeing the surface lures

For many netizens, the appeal of Internet resources lies in ease of access, the speed of retrieval and quick readability. Web site designers are well aware of these factors but often learners may not be aware of the structures which are very carefully designed to generate income, gain clicks to other sites and channel searches by Search Engine Optimisation. Visual literacy and raising learners' awareness of this may then assist in a more critical approach to resources. Merchant notes 'that context is of central importance in any practice of literacy and the multi-modal nature of many screen-based texts highlights the importance of combining our reading of visual and other modes with digital writing as we make meaning ((2007, p.120). Making meaning therefore requires varied reading and writing approaches because of the way both visual and written messages are presented in digital media. However, some reading skills do cut across any so called "digital native" (Prensky, 2001) differences if one sees that text processing is linked to visual scanning and applicable to varied on screen and print delivery modes. It could be useful to highlight the skills of skimming, scanning and retention of detail when reading in different modalities. In other words, the skills for print reading are transferable to seeing how a page structures your responses and how we at different times skim, scan and look for detail.

Reflective task 2:

- **Go to a favourite web site**
- **Note what you first look at**
- **What do you notice after the first point of attention?**
- **What colours fonts and images appeal?**
- **What does the web site want you to do- the call to action?**
- **How does the web site create believability?**
- **Who made the website and why did they create it?**
- **Where do you go to online after this site and why?**

The tried and tested approaches of skimming, scanning and seeking out detail could be equally applied to images and the overall design of a web page. One notes that eye movement research suggests that visual scanning is not an act of from top to bottom eye movement. On-screen reading also involves perceiving the role of different size fonts, varied colours and the placement of images and text within a screen. Many factors are at work including colour, elements within page positioning and how designers position elements based on eye movement (e-copywring-cz-3jaworowiczbasiak122012stronysocialmedia-12-638). While this area is complex and beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth considering visual literacy as an element which may make for more critical use of online resources.

Visual literacy has been defined as by Eshet-Alkali (2004) as *synchronic literacy* in which readers link text, images, sound and motion in multimedia simulations. Her research in a study of the ‘living books’ genre found that young learners perceived words as pictures by using digital, aural and visual stimuli in synchronicity. Images can play an important part in stimulating learners beyond the well-known areas of early learning with links between stories, online resources, U Tube and videos as innovators such as Keddie demonstrate and share online (2009, 2017). As educationalists, I would argue that just as we assist learners in unpacking text we have little choice but to broaden their literacy and unpacking of meaning to visuals.

We could foster more critical use of online resources if learners understand the reasons designers use multi-modalities- in much the same way that writers choose written constructions to convey their message. Conveying messages through writing is however of equal importance to our learners as is unpacking meaning online. The next section addresses writing and the importance of going beyond Googling by analysing, then synthesising information.

SYNTHESISING INFORMATION

With an abundance of online information, web page designers and users of other social media platforms are always aspiring to hit a unique engagement point that will cause the posting or story to go viral. More often than not, such an online sensation is the synthesis of elements which are not usually related, suggesting that the ability to synthesise in a creative manner is a useful skill to acquire in the Internet-savvy world. This section of the paper will therefore describe some approaches for educators working with the development of productive digital literacy. The first step is to ascertain that we are working with reality, rather than ‘fake news.’

One of the skills which seems neglected in the world of online information is authenticating sources. While the academic world may have a strongly entrenched system of referencing sources, the web offers openness and the posting of nearly, but not all, words or images. There appears to little integration of systematic approaches to authentication of online sources within education. One can of course refer to sites such as Snopes, Open Secret.org and Fact Check.org. to check the authenticity of content itself. However, it is also useful to assess who owns a site, where the URL originates from and what is the real purpose of the site as in its *call to action*. Often the site may have embedded sensational headlines or links, some of which can be ‘click bait’. Preliminary research with Malaysian tertiary students reveals that few are aware of how a website may be really generating income from the embedded advertisements or content provided

by content farms which are “click bait’ headlines or embedded URLs luring you to another marketing site. Clickbait has been described as

A form of web content that employs writing formulas and linguistic techniques in headlines to trick readers into clicking links, but does not deliver on promises. Media scholars and pundits consistently show clickbait content in a bad light, but the industry based on this type of content has been rapidly growing and reaching more and more people across the world. Taboola, one of the key providers of clickbait content, claims to have doubled its monthly reach from 500 million unique users to 1 billion in a single year from March 2015. The growth of clickbait industry appears to have clear impact on the media ecosystem. (Rony et al, 2017)

Checking authenticity is an important step before synthesising the information found online but it is not limited to written information. Checking the authenticity of images is a skill which still seems to be regarded as the area of Information Technologists. Yet with the widespread use of ‘Fake News’ (Mihailidis & Viotta., 2017; Corner, 2017) means the checking the authenticity of both written and visual information is essential, as well as at times a politically astute choice.

As information is multi-modal and moving across many web-based, cloud- based and social media platforms rapidly, and at times virally, images have become as important as words. This is especially so with the rise of often inventive Photoshopping, memes creation and the use of aps such as What’s Ap to share images. One can reverse image search using a Chrome application of search on Google image. The steps for this can be found online. Other software is available for other platforms. Searching the authenticity of images is relatively easy for websites which many regard as one of the more stable online platforms. The authenticity and original source of an image is also important, if we are going to instil the importance of intellectual property, copyright and ascribing sources into our educational processes. For learners to produce in amongst the abundance of online information one needs to be able to be impactful and this requires creative synthesis.

A Synthesising information task

To synthesise or create ideas often requires merging elements from different sources. The reading and writing tasks of compare and contrast texts are a useful framework to begin with. I would like to suggest a pair work task which provides for pair work which can generate vocabulary across a class and provide a foundation for synthesis.

Reflective Task 3

- **Choose a topic of interest to both in the pair.**
- **List any related words by brainstorming or semantic mapping**
- **Write a question both would like answered**
- **Search for it using Search Grammar**
- **Find two web sites which provide the answers.**
- **They need not be the first on the top of the list of the search engine.**
- **The top of list positioning can be bought.**
- **Then for each search, answer these:**

- **Where does the site come from?**
- **Why do you like the site?**
- **Is it up to date?**
- **Does it give enough detail?**
- **If not research and find a better source.**
- **Do pair and share in the class explaining your choice to others**

A synthesis extension is to design a landing page (the first page) of a website using information from both chosen websites using one's own words.

In synthesising for digital literacy as with writing comparison tasks varied sources of information or ideas are important. In both assessing and producing text, accuracy and authenticity are fundamental and can be aided by online and in text checkers. Even the grammar check of Word is useful. Clearly vocabulary plays a central role in developing summarising skills so as to avoid the cut and paste approach. To reduce this to a formulation I suggest some web site evaluation and production factors which can contribute to both online and off line text awareness

Authenticity: reality checking as described earlier

Bonding and buy in: how is the reader engaged with a 'hook' but not false 'click bait'.

Currency: being up to date. Is the date of the writing and images clear or traceable?

Depth of ideas and details: does the content deliver what the headline promises

In reality, the major online area of interest for today's learners is not websites but the reproduction and production of one's own self. In the audience today of the two hundred or so of you, only five are not on Facebook, whereas very few of you have websites. As academic and teachers we may search and use Websites, but clearly for ourselves as educators and our students a huge part of digital literacy is not seeking information or synthesising information. It is sharing information, often about ourselves. The next part of the paper addresses sharing information in the world of data mining.

SHARING INFORMATION

Sharing information often in the form of visuals is an increasingly important part of how netizens define themselves. The sense of establishing one's identity online is often dominant in platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit and other 'in the moment'; sharing platforms, rather than in the less fleeting platform of websites. Yet whether it is a website, blog, sharing, landscape shot, a selfie or a wefie, we all leave a 'digital footprint' of one kind or another shaped by platform used. (Lewis, 2015). Parkinson et al (2017,1) describe a variety of terms "for one's online persona such as *'digital footprint, finger print, shadow, profile, mosaic, persona, virtual self or doppelganger,'*" The researchers argue that legislation such as that recently passed in Europe is a small step to protecting the privacy of what they adroitly termed 'The Digitally Extended Self'. For many the *digital footprint* remains a widely used image describing the recently demonstrated phenomenon of how one's own line presence is shared and trackable.

It could be argued that how we craft our digital footprint or digitally extended self and how aware we are of traces left by our online activity is an important part of educating learners about digital production and sharing. As Frier (2017) reported ‘ Facebook Inc. said that data on as many as 87 million people, most of them in the U.S., may have been improperly shared with research firm Cambridge Analytica’. One’s own line presence clearly involves issues of privacy and how a self-image or digitally extended self may become the property of corporations. What we share online creates a record of one’s identity which has become a source of information for many who wish to generate income or research peoples’ thinking (Golder, 2014). The way we portray ourselves online may be motivated by the desire to be socially acceptable by peers and ‘liked’ repeatedly. Nevertheless, our online interactions provide profitable data for extensive data mining. As was recently made very clear, data mining is very extensive.

Preliminary research by this writer suggests that some Malaysian University level students who are studying Information Technology are not aware of how data can be mined. They were not mindful of how easy it is for future employers to search the online identity of prospective job candidates. When asked how they saw themselves the students were able to describe physical or socially positive attributes, but they were less forthcoming on how they may be seen by those outside their peer group. Getting students to reflect on their online professional identity as part of a possible digital portfolio created many questions about how digital images could be removed. The answer which has been so thoroughly been revealed by recent Facebook data breaches is that it is nearly impossible. This suggests a strong need to educate our learners on being conscious and aware of what words and images they are posting. In conclusion, a conscious awareness of the production of digital written data shared online is just as important an area of going beyond Google, as is effective searching.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued the case for raising awareness of skilled questioning and reflection for all we do with the huge amount of information online. I have suggested that as we search skilfully and create online that research and productive skills should be based on awareness and creativity. Clearly learners’ vocabulary levels and the facilitation of how we question are central to using online resources and to developing critical and creative citizens. As facilitators of learning, there is much we can model though asking questions and presenting varied ways of inquiry so as to go beyond the transmission mode to the path of inquiry and creative use of digital literacy. The top of the Google search is not always the right answer and we do live in a world of fake news. If this presentation has been unusual with its interactive tasks it is because I find that many of us learn more by engaging and doing rather than by listening.

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