

Student Behaviors: Academic Task Performance with Support from Information from English Websites

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Abstract

This paper reports Thai students' behaviors when seeking information from the Internet. It was done with students from Thammasat University. 262 students completed the questionnaires and 20 students were interviewed. Research methodology also includes Web surfing demonstration. It is found that students regulate themselves and modify their keywords when searching for information. However, some resources such as electronic database are not known to many students. Also, although the students state that they realize the need to establish reliability of the information they get from the Internet, in actual practice, they rarely consider this when engaged in academic tasks.

Introduction

At the present, Thai university students search for information from the Internet when they are engaged in academic tasks. The reason for this is that the Internet offers a more convenient way to access information than printed materials. In Thailand, books and other printed materials for reference are not enough. However, searching for information from the Internet can bring

about some problems such as incorrect information, obsolete information, and inability to use search engines effectively.

I believe in the potential of the Internet as an important source of information for Thai college students. However, to my knowledge, there has been no study which focuses on Thai college students' behaviors when searching for information from the web. Researchers such as Cmor, D., & Lippold, K. (2001) believe that students still need advice so that their searches will be more effective. However, if there is no study on students' behaviors, educators do not realize the former's problems and thus cannot plan any interventions to help them improve the effectiveness of their searches. This study will systematize students' searching behaviors.

Research Questions

To explore these issues, I conducted a study using both qualitative and quantitative method, describing reading strategies used across these contexts guided by four related questions:

- 1 Do students seek information from English websites when they do academic tasks? What is the role of information from English websites?

- 2: What are students' behaviors when they search for information from websites?
- 3: How do the students get support?
- 4: How do they manage information found from the web?

Literature Review

Researchers such as Asefeh Asemi (2005) state that information from the Internet plays an important role in today's academic practice. He adds that the Internet is even a better place to look for information than libraries.

However, one problem is that students are not trained to retrieve information from the Internet properly. Scholars such as Fadel (2007) have examined problems associated with students' searching behaviors. One problem is that students rely on the famous search engine www.google.com too heavily. For example, When UT-Arlington students were asked what they use for research on campus, without hesitation most responded "Google." They conceded that they don't know how to do much else on the Internet.

Further, according to ETS, Of 10,000 high school and college students asked to evaluate a set of Web sites last fall, nearly half could not correctly judge which was the most objective, reliable and timely, according to preliminary results of a digital-literacy assessment.

Research Methodology

The participants of this study were 262 Thammasat university students who were studying EG 221 *Reading for Information* during semester 2/2006. They were from various faculties such as Faculty of Liberal Arts, Faculty of Political Sciences, Faculty of Accountancy and Commerce, Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Laws, and Faculty of Journalism and Mass Media. 262 students

completed the questionnaires. 20 students participated in interviews. Research methodology also includes Web surfing demonstration.

Results

Research questions 1: Do students seek information from English websites when they do academic tasks? What is the role of information from English websites?

The topic of the reports determined whether websites are good sources of information. When asked whether they used information from English websites in their report, most of the students said yes. Patra, for example, said that "The report in this class must be written in English. Thus, English websites make our work easier. If we go to Thai websites, we have to translate the information into English, and that's not the easiest thing to do." Siranee also commented that "We like English websites because you have varieties of information. Thai websites were created later, so there's not much in them."

However, seeking information from websites may not be appropriate for some topics. For example, students who were working on the topic of *The Chao Praya River* stated that it was more convenient to find information on their topic from books. "I don't see much information about the Chao Praya River on websites. When there is, the information is too shallow. Thus, I think that I'll find information about it from Thai printed materials and translate it into English," commented Bussara.

The extant study shows that students had to resort to information from websites. When asked why, the students said that books can be difficult to find. , books have disadvantages too. Printed materials are difficult to find.

Research question 2: What are students' behaviors when they search for information from websites?

Strategies

Strategies employed with printed materials can be transferred to on-line texts as well. The knowledge of organizational and structural features of informational text such as signal words, bold-faced or italicized typography and paragraph headings, index, and table of contents can be helpful when students read texts (see Armbruster, 1984; Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). The skilled readers in my study integrated their understanding of these informational features and structures as they read within websites on the Internet. In Chuarayapratib (2005a, 2005b, 2006), some strategies found in on-line text was familiar in printed text. Normally, when the students scanned the passages, they knew what they were looking for, so they concentrated on finding a particular answer. They searched for key words or ideas. Nitsa, for example, claimed that she usually scanned the inbox before she read e-mails. She also complained of spam. Thus, she usually read quickly to find the names that she knew. Similarly, the students in the extant study also scanned to get what they wanted. Let's look at the following example.

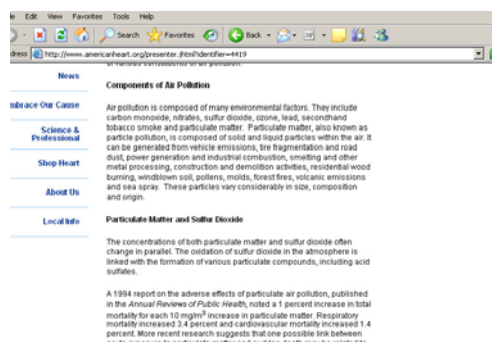


Figure 1: from [americanheart.org/ presenter.jspx?identifier=4419](http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jspx?identifier=4419) which Woradee and Patra arrived at. They scanned for the headings that seemed relevant to their needs.

They paid special attention to the heading Components of Air Pollution and read the content which followed.

Woradee and Patra were looking for cause of air pollution. Woradee, for example, drew from her prior knowledge of printed informational text structure as she searched for information about air pollution. As she scanned a particular website, she expected to find certain textual features to support her reading based on her experiences with printed informational text: “Maybe we should scan the page to see if there are any headings that might show where that would be.” In this case the heading components of air pollution, told her what this section was about: elements in air pollution. The heading particulate matter and sulfur dioxide was gas found in air pollution.

Self-Regulation

According to Zimmerman (1994), self-regulated learning is the “degree that individuals are ...motivationally, and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process” (p. 3). It has also been referred to as the processes by which individuals exercise control over their own thinking, their emotions and behaviour as they acquire knowledge (Zimmerman, 1989). Zimmerman (2001) self-regulation is not a mental ability, nor is it an academic performance; rather it is a self-directive process through which learners transform their mental abilities into related academic skills.

In this extant study, students make use of self-regulatory reading strategies such as goal setting, rereading, monitoring, and comprehension repair. Students were very conscious of their goals and stopped reading that page immediately. Let's look at the example below:

Patra and Siranee arrived at another page on smoking.

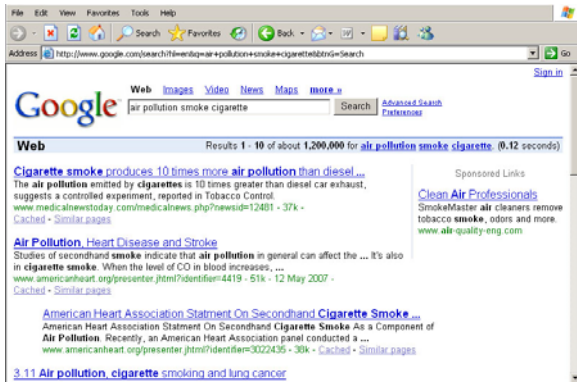


Figure 2: from <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=air+pollution+smoke+cigarette&btnG=Search>, which Siranee and Patra arrived at. They quickly read the summary of the first link and decided to click at it.

The students read the summary of the first link. They decided that it seemed relevant because they were seeking information on effects of air pollution. Chose the first one and arrived at this page. Patra made a forward inference, “the page should be about the way air pollution. One cause of it is smoke emitted by cigarette.” Unfortunately, however, they arrived at

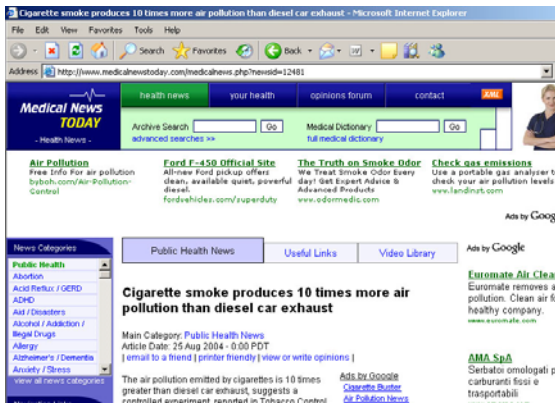


Figure 3: From <http://www.medicalnews.com/articles/12481.php>, which Patra and Siranee arrived at when they a link after they read the summary and made a forward inference. Unfortunately, this page was not appropriate to their needs.

By skimming through the passage, the students realized that this page did not meet their needs. The students did not think that this page was appropriate. They were adherent to their goals.” I want general information about the cause of air pollution. This page, however, contains only one specific case. It concerns the comparison between air pollution caused by cigarette smoking and that caused by diesel car exhaust.”

In conclusion, students were actively monitoring their own search. They constantly evaluated whether they were coming closer to their goals. They demonstrated ability to translate their mental ability into immediate academic tasks. Thus, self-regulatory strategies and metacognitive awareness played important roles when students were participating in open on-line search, where they were exposed to millions and millions of websites.

Establishing the Reliability of the Information from the Web

When asked whether the students thought evaluating websites was important to confirm their reliability, the students said yes. When asked how they evaluated whether a particular website is reliable, they said by looking at the domain names. If they ended with .org or .edu, it was more likely that the content should be more reliable. Nareeporn said, .org means that website is from an organization, so the information should be reliable. .edu means the website is from an educational institution, so it is unlikely that professors should lie to us. On the other hand, the ending with .com signifies commercial involvement, so that particular websites should be less reliable.

Another strategy is to find other web pages to see whether they have the same information. If a number of web pages had the same information, it is very likely that the information should be truthful.

However, when the students found information they needed, they did not seem to care about the importance of evaluating website's reliability. The focus was on the relevance to the texts. Moreover, as in 1.2, the students were pleased that the page seemed to be taken from printed materials. The students seemed to be oblivious of the fact that this page was written by an American authority.

Research question 3: How did the students get support?

Electronic Database

Not many students had experience with electronic database before. However, students can get help from their peers. Chiraporn did not about electronic journal database. Journals which are included in the database have very good reputation and very reliable, with strict peer review. Fortunately, Sutheera knew how to use it. She showed Chiraporn electronic database.

Sutheera showed her friends that there were a number of online database that could be clicked. Below each database, there is a summary in Thai as to the area it in involved. Sutheera, in particular believed that they could find what they wanted from science direct. She said, "Our topic is related to science and sciencedirect is a database containing a lot of journals in science. I'm positive that we will find what we want there."

So they chose sciencedirect database and arrive at sciencedirect homepage:

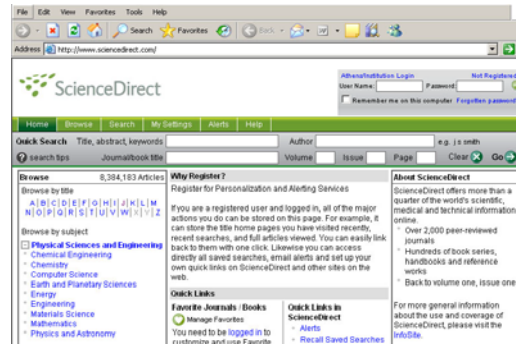


Figure 4: the sciencedirect homepage, which Sutheera and Chiraporn arrived by choosing a database from the university webpage.

When the students finally arrived at this page, they commented that the system was much like that of google.com search engine. However, there were a lot of special features that google did not have. For example, the opaque signal in front of the name of the article signified that the university subscribed to it. Thus, the students could access to that article immediately. The white ones meant that the university did not subscribe to the journal. However, if that article was really important to their task, they could buy that article online. The students even had the option whether they wanted to read abstract only, abstract and links or full text either in pdf or in html. They could email the article if they did not want to read the article immediately. Students could access to the article if they were using a computer connected to the university network. As discussed in 1.1 students had limited time reading articles from the university because, unfortunately, it did not have enough computers. Thus, the students might want to email this article.

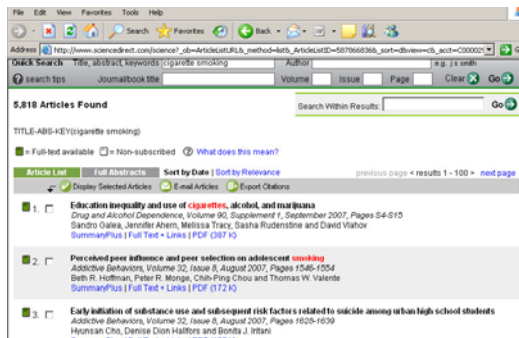


Figure 5. This is the result of their search. The students commented that the system was much like that of google.com search engine.

Research question 4: How do they manage information found from the web?

The students did not print the page they considered relevant to their topic right away. When I asked why, they said that they would like to avoid wasting paper. What they printed might not be usable. Moreover, if they were searching information from computers in school lab, they were not provided with paper for printing. They would copy the information into Microsoft Word so that they can see whether the information is relevant or not. When I asked whether their eyes got sore quickly when they read from the screen, they said not.

Another advantage was that they had chances to let their classmates see whether the information can be used in their paper. According to one student, “Since it is a group report, I would like my friends to see it first before I print it out.”

Conclusion

This study shows that students had experience with searching for information from the Internet. However, some useful resources such as electronic database are not known to many students. Moreover, although the students state that they realize the need to establish reliability of the information they get from the Internet, in

actual practice, they rarely consider this when engaged in academic tasks.

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