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The use of the internet for educational purposes

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Abstract

The growth of the Internet in the world provides many opportunities to many people around the world in many different ways. When students are considered, the use of the Internet is mainly for social and entertainment purposes. However, it is very obvious that the Internet provides not only social connection and entertainment, but also academic and scientific information as well. Additionally, the Internet can be used as a tool to learn the latest news all around the world as well as getting any kind of information that serves different purposes such as learning more information about a hobby or health. Therefore, it can be said that the Internet is the source of spreading information quickly to a large audience and of going beyond the limitation of time and space. In the light of the above information, it is vitally important to encourage students to use this invaluable source to get any kind of information they need in their academic studies. For the reasons mentioned above, the aim of this study is look at the students' use of Internet in their academic studies. The participants are around 150 English Preparatory School students in Eastern Mediterranean University. These students have come from different countries in order to study at various departments in the university. The study is carried out in the Spring Semester of the Academic Year 2010-2011.

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1. Introduction

Since the emergence of the Internet, it has become an important medium of communication as well as a research and leisure tool. The reason is that it provides many opportunities to many people around the world in many different ways. Not only the Internet, but the other new digital technologies also took their places in the daily life. The wide access to these technologies improves people's lives and provides great opportunities. People have started to access any kind of information easily on the Internet and also use it for social, educational and entertainment purposes. Basically, the Internet offers two main benefits which are communication and information (Warren et. al., 1998). On a more comprehensive basis, it can be pointed out that the Internet has some functions, especially in education, and these can be listed as (i) storehouse of information, (ii) communication without boundaries, (iii) online interactive learning, (iv) electronic/online research, (v) innovation in the new world, (vi) improve interest in learning, (vii) global education, and (viii) information catalogues (Park, 2009). As the Internet has many different functions, it is important to consider to what extent it is used by students in higher education for academic purposes.

When educational aspect of the Internet use is considered, it is obvious that students, or people in general, who look for information can access it easily and with low cost. It is evident that the Internet is a source of enormous information that anything can quickly and easily be reached. Internet also provides students asynchronous education where they can reach any kind of information anytime and anywhere. This widens the world of students as

nowadays kids do not like to use libraries or any kinds of real life resources but they can access these places online and benefit from them easily and quickly. Additionally, the Internet can be used as a tool to learn the latest news all around the world as well as getting any kind of information that serves different purposes such as learning more information about a hobby or health. Therefore, it can be said that the Internet is the source of spreading information quickly to a large audience and of going beyond the limitation of time and space.

Regarding students who are obviously accepted as passionate users of the Internet, the use of the Internet is mainly for social and entertainment purposes since the Internet revolution is not just limited to finding information but also bringing people together. However, it is very obvious that the Internet provides not only social connection and entertainment, but also academic and scientific information as well. Thus, it is vitally important to encourage students to use this invaluable source to get any kind of information they need in their academic studies because the development of the Internet would be meaningless if it is not used appropriately in education. Therefore, new digital technologies have been widely involved in higher education institutions as well as other sections of the education system all over the world (Park and Biddix, 2008). In addition, Internet use has the potential to improve the quality of education (Ciglaric et al., 1998; Charp, 2000; Laurillard, 1992). Charp (2000) also stated that the Internet brought numerous positive changes to teachers and instructors. According to Dryli & Kinnaman (1996), the Internet enables students to find information as well as allowing them to think critically and creatively, to become collaborative and cooperative workers and to solve problems.

Besides the children of the new technological era that we live in today are influenced by the new literacies and pedagogies, it is important to consider the fact that “the capability to use online and offline databases as well as web search-engines effectively is paramount in cyberspace” (Nentwich, 2003). Today’s students, future scholars and knowledge workers, are required to have the ability to reach the correct information and they need to be able to get the necessary and accurate information amongst unlimited bits of information. “Finding the right information is only one side of the core business of academics. As Nentwich (2003) stated the other side is organizing, structuring and evaluating the information space. At this point, it is a necessity to mention the three important Internet literacies defined by Burgess (2006): (i) Critical Literacy – a deep, socially contextualized, and informed understanding of the Internet; (ii) Creative Literacy – The ability to experiment with the Internet in order to create and absorbing information; and (iii) Network Literacy – The ability and the impulse to effectively and ethically manipulate a range of the Internet technologies to communicate and collaboratively construct and share knowledge (Burgess, 2006).

When the previous studies on the Internet are examined, it can clearly be seen that the majority is focused on the differences between learning outcomes of the courses taught with using the Internet and the courses taught in the traditional ways (Benoit et. al., 2006). However, it is important to be aware of the fact that students are not inactive receivers during the transmission of knowledge via the Internet. The efficacy of students and looking at the picture through their eyes is vitally important in the way to reach success. As a result of the reasons supported by the literature and mentioned above, the aim of this study is look at the students’ use of the Internet in their academic studies.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 100 students who studied in different levels at English Preparatory School, Eastern Mediterranean University during Spring Semester of 2010 – 2011. In the study there were 80 male and 20 female students. Nearly half of them were at the age of 19 and 20 and 32% of them were 21 and above. 50 of them were from Turkey, 17 of them were from North Cyprus, 15 of them were from Azerbaijan, 8 of them from Iran and there were 9 participants from other countries.

2.2 Instrument

In the study an adapted version of the “Self-Efficacy Scale on Educational Use of the Internet” which was prepared by Sahin (2009) was used as the instrument. The ready scale was prepared in Turkish and there were

students who did not know Turkish in the population so the English version of the scale was prepared for the study by the researchers. During the preparation of the English version, one of the researchers translated it into English and the English version of the scale was proof-read and then re-translated into Turkish in order to see if English and Turkish versions of the scale were in parallel.

In the first part of the instrument, there were three items which were designed by the researchers to obtain background information of the participants. The “Self-efficacy Scale on Educational Use of the Internet” was used in the second part of the instrument. In the scale there were 28 positive statements with five-likert choices as ‘I’m insufficient’, ‘I’m a little sufficient’, ‘I’m sufficient’, ‘I’m quite sufficient’ and ‘I’m completely sufficient’. Participants were asked to choose the best alternative that described them for each statement.

After conducting the research, the reliability value of the scale was calculated as 0.966 which is statistically accepted as considerably high. The result is shown in Table 1,

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.966	28

2.3 Procedure

After the necessary permissions were taken from the Administration of the English Preparatory School, the researchers approached the class teachers, explained the instrument briefly and asked them to help their students mark their choices on the optic answer sheet. When the instruments were collected, the optic answer sheets were processed and then PASW Statistics 18 was used in order to examine the data. Participants' responds to the scale were computed in order to obtain total scores of them. Then the each item's frequencies were examined in order to identify in which areas participants felt themselves confident.

3. Results

In this section the overall and item-based results of the participants were given. First of all, participants' self-efficacy on using the Internet as an educational tool was examined and then detail examination of the items were done in order to find out in which areas the participants felt themselves sufficient enough.

3.1 Overall Self-Efficacy Results

In the scale there were 28 items and when the participants responded as ‘I’m completely sufficient’ they got 5 and when they responded as ‘I’m insufficient’ they got 1. Therefore, the highest mark for the scale was ‘140’ and the lowest mark was ‘28’. In the light of this information participants who scored between 140 – 121 are considered as good, 120 – 71 as ‘average’, and 70 – 28 as ‘not good’. The results were given in Table 2. As it can be clearly seen from the table, 24% of the participants believed that they were good at using the Internet as an educational tool, 70% of them believed that they were ‘Average’ and 6% of them claimed that they were not good while using the Internet.

Table 2 Self-Efficacy Level of Participants of Using Internet as Educational Tool

Marks	Accepted as	Percentage
140 – 121	Good	24
120 – 71	Average	70
70 – 28	Not Good	6

3.2 Item Analysis of the Scale

In this section, it was aimed to examine the areas that students felt themselves sufficient and insufficient by analyzing the items in the scale in detail. Therefore, according to the responses of the participants, the percentages of each alternative were calculated and the items were reordered from top to down.

3.2.1 Areas That Students Feel Sufficient

In this section it was aimed to find out the areas that the participants felt themselves sufficient enough while using the Internet for educational purposes. Table 3 shows the areas that most of the participants felt themselves sufficient. As it can be clearly seen in Table 3, most of the participants (80%) declared that they use search engines on the Internet and as they were preparatory school students who have been learning English, they stated that they used e-dictionaries on the Internet with a high percentage (67%). As EMU English Preparatory School instructors encourage their students to create and join the Facebook group of their classes in order to discuss class-related topics, considerable amount of participants (65%) confirmed that they used the Internet to talk about school subjects and homework. Also, students are expected to prepare an oral presentation as part of their assessments so the majority asserted that they used the Internet to find source of information, to download pictures or photos, and to do research. They also used the Internet for translation as most of them did not feel themselves confident enough to write academic writings in English.

Table 3 Areas That Students Feel Sufficient While Using the Internet

ITEMS	Insufficient & a little sufficient	Sufficient	Quite and completely sufficient
To use search engines like Google , Yahoo etc.	10	10	80
To use e-dictionary	14	19	67
To establish a connection with my friends on the Internet via MSN, Yahoo Messenger, Facebook etc. to talk about school subjects and homework	15	20	65
To learn recent (up-to-date) information and the latest developments (innovations) from the Internet	12	24	64
To find the source of information on the Internet	9	28	63
To share any kind of data with my friends on the Internet	8	29	63
To learn about general culture affairs	12	25	63
To download pictures or photos from the Internet for homework or projects	13	25	62
To download or watch videos related to lessons	21	18	61
To do research on the Internet for my homework and projects	18	22	60
To read notes and other writings related to lessons from different web sites	17	23	60
To translate documents that are written in a foreign language (e.g. English)	18	24	58
To do in-depth research on the topics that were explained and took my attention in classes	13	30	57
To follow up recent news and events (occasions, incidents) about education from the Internet	18	25	57
To reach resources that are related to foreign languages	23	23	54

3.2.2 Areas That Students Feel Insufficient

In this section it was aimed to find out the areas that the participants felt themselves insufficient while using the Internet for educational purposes. Table 4 shows the areas that most of the participants felt themselves insufficient. When Table 4 is examined carefully, it is possible to say that considerable amount of the participants of this study did not use the Internet to learn laws and regulations, and they were not familiar with e-books and e-learning portals. As they were still studying at the preparatory school of a university, they did not use the Internet for following educational journals or any database programs. However, it was interesting to find out that considerable amount of students did not use the Internet to examine the websites designed for English learning purposes.

Table 4 Areas That Students Feel Insufficient While Using the Internet

ITEMS	Insufficient & a little sufficient	Sufficient	Quite and completely sufficient
To get information about laws and regulations from official websites	35	23	42
To participate in classes and exam applications by e-learning portals on the Internet	32	24	43
To find and download e-books	32	25	43
To find interactive programme samples from the Internet	30	28	42
To follow educational journals on the Internet	30	24	46
To enter library websites on the Internet	29	28	43
To use database programmes on the Internet	28	24	48
To examine Internet sites that are designed for English learning purposes	27	26	47
To benefit from the forums related to education	26	26	48
To search for educational games on the Internet	24	30	46
To get information about the topics I have learned in class	24	30	46
To examine the articles or other publications available on the Internet	20	33	47
To examine software programs that are developed for English learning purposes	20	33	47

4. Conclusion and Discussion

In general it was clear that the majority of the students believed they can use the Internet as an educational tool. Only a very small amount of participants stated that they were not able to use it for educational purposes, which is very promising for the future.

There were certain areas that students felt comfortable while using the Internet such as the search engines on the Internet, which is easily and efficiently used and preferred by 80% of the participants in this study. Also, they stated that they used social websites to share knowledge and talk about school subjects. They also claimed that they could easily use the Internet to find sources of information, download necessary files and pictures and so on. Moreover, the participants stated that they used e-dictionaries, e-encyclopedias and translation tools to help them write their homework and do their projects.

The only problematic areas which seemed the participants are not very good at were blogs, wikis and e-learning portals and the reason might be neither students nor teachers could really cope with them efficiently and appropriately. Both groups are not very familiar with these Internet options as well as with the educational journals and database programs. Furthermore, educational journals could be another issue to be considered. As the participants of this study were preparatory school students, they might have not needed to use educational journals in order to be successful in their academic studies or fulfill their academic tasks.

Therefore, it is vital and important to provide opportunities to students to learn these areas which are indispensable tools in today's academic and social life.

As a further study, it could be a good idea to conduct a similar study after a course which aims to familiarize students with these tools. In the study, the participants of the course could be asked to choose the best items that describe them in the scale both at the beginning and at the end of the course in order to see whether there are any differences in the efficacy level of the students.

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