

# 6 Purposeful searching: Training students in Internet literacy for Italian studies

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## Abstract

In this fast-changing information age, teachers and students can feast at a banquet of material on the Internet. This is a very good thing in these tight economic times, when education systems are strapped for cash and many arts and music courses are being cut in favor of classes to develop so-called marketable skills, such as business, biology or chemistry. So, teachers of language and language arts often try to find materials on the Internet to excite their students' interest. In this study, which reveals a teaching-learning approach, the students from the Dublin Institute of Technology in Ireland created their own virtual language environment as the teacher guided the students to search for resources on the Internet. In order to make the most of student time, I provided initial guidelines to help the students get good materials. First I taught them how to discriminate among sources, filter search results and document sources.

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**Keywords:** Internet search, Italian studies, language learning, action research.

## 1. Introduction

As a teacher in the 21st century, I have found it nearly impossible to teach satisfactorily using only the textbook in this age of immediate feedback, instant satisfaction, and short attention spans. Student engagement is so important that

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the new media must be used in order to hold students' attention. I found that the best materials for post-secondary Italian language students were either movies or materials found on the Internet. The materials available on the Internet are just as useful as books, and more up-to-date, because the lag time in releasing published textbooks is months at best. Since the most commonly used vocabulary can be found in popular reading material, it makes sense to let students pick their own study materials. I also encourage the students to participate in role playing games, especially those games that have live sound. Most importantly, these up-to-date materials contain current cultural situations, which are critical for language learning (Omer & Ali, 2011).

Whereas teachers cannot do individual lessons for each student from a different source, it is possible to train the students to do their own (Gee, 2004). And to assess their learning, creating lessons, assessments and applying them can as easily be done by students with a good teacher's guidance (Gee, 2004). One might assume that to create lessons and assessments for students amounts to a great deal more work for the teacher, but such is not the case. The teacher's role becomes more like that of a mentor, which has inherent benefits for both parties.

It takes a bit more up-front planning to use this method, but the results are worthwhile. Basically we are teaching students to learn as a life-long process. Though some research shows that lecturers do not consider teaching students to learn as part of their jobs at post-secondary level, it is often necessary (Waeytens & Others, 1997). Students become self-disciplined self-educators once they have the tools required to make this transition (Cherif et al., 2009, p. 346). It is quite well documented that cooperative collaboration is a key element to active learning (Istifci & Kaya, 2011, p. 88). This approach empowers students to take charge of their own education, which is right in line with Gee's three necessities for learning: "Empowered learners, Problem solving, and Understanding" (2005, p. 6).

In this chapter I describe how to help students find relevant Internet materials that they like. In two separate classes, one ab-initio Italian and one intermediate

Italian, students were given a lesson on Internet media literacy. I presented them with the directions for conducting useful searches, including creating search strings, sifting the results, and using various resources on the Internet, such as search engines, compilation and review sites, social media and reference sites. Even Wikipedia can be useful in the beginning stages. Then I asked the students to find Italian folk tales in Italian and in English translation. The advanced students were asked to try doing their searches in Italian first, or to work in pairs with one searching in Italian and one searching in English. Computers were used in the school library and navigation tracking was turned on when they searched in order to record information that would help me to work with students to improve these results. At the suggestion of some advanced students, I added role playing games to the list of possibly helpful materials<sup>1</sup>.

The students appreciated their training and they dug up some really interesting, culturally significant materials, such as cooking videos of Italian chefs, Italian street talk, and even a range of Italian folk tales. Using some ideas from Gee (2005), the students created some very interesting materials and assessments. The Internet is a banquet that can easily lead to information overload, but with some training and care, students can learn to navigate and benefit from their searching.

## **2. Action research project**

The teaching-learning approach I have proposed closely resembles an ongoing action research project (Stringer, 2007). In the case used for this study, there are two things that change the traditional curriculum and methodology of teaching: 1) environmental changes that modify what students will need for employment and life skills and 2) student performance and feedback.

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1. Materials were basically reusable materials, often called reusable learning objects, such as PowerPoints, handouts, model lessons, templates for student group work, sample feedback for other students to use to critique other groups, plus copies of the lessons students created, which can be used both as real lessons and as models for future classes (Barritt, Lewis, & Wieseler, 1999).

The assessments at the end of the term are seriously considered in creating lessons and devising teaching methods for the following term. Student performance helps validate the methods used, as assessments are carefully segmented so that they can easily be attached to the teaching methodology and materials.

Action research, as defined by [Stringer \(2007\)](#), is a continuing cycle of “creation – presentation – assessment” (p. 19). So the methods and materials used this school term may change in the next term by being modified to better serve student needs. If students do not learn well with certain types of teaching methods (as was the case with my students), other methods will be devised until one works. If the students do not engage with the materials, then they are changed. This is ongoing and it is expected that it will continue, until the results are satisfactory. The biggest bonus in this type of teaching will come in the form of student involvement, because they are picking their own materials.

The project based upon this method used two classes of Italian for students at post-secondary level in Ireland. In this case, it was one class of mixed continuing education students from varied disciplines at intermediate level and one class of culinary arts students taking ab-initio Italian. The gender balance in the general class was 60 percent female, 40 percent male, and the culinary arts class was just the opposite. All students were aged 17-26. The average socio-economic status of students was lower-middle income and middle class. Their choice of Italian as an elective was based upon its connection to culinary arts or to the students’ perception that it was an easy option. The project was conducted in semester one in 2011 and semester two in 2012. Seventy percent of students continued to the second year.

### **3. Curriculum planning**

#### **3.1. Outline of lessons**

Depending upon the frequency of classes, these types of lessons can be used weekly or more often, as the teacher decides. In this case, the intermediate

level met twice weekly and the beginner level met thrice weekly. One class was totally devoted to this project weekly with ten to fifteen minute periods as needed on other days.

### 3.1.1. *Lesson one: introduction to research*

- **Objectives.** The main objectives for this lesson are:
  1. to introduce the teaching methods;
  2. to create balanced groups. The pretest will allow the teacher to select at least one strong student and one weak student for each group so that no single group will have only strong or only weak students;
  3. to introduce Internet search methods, which will be detailed step by step on a handout, to aid students in finding what they need.
- The teacher provides a broad overview and description of what students will learn and how this will be accomplished (10 minutes). PowerPoint works well, but discussion is critical to get students involved right away. Offer this approach as an alternative and see if enough interest is stirred.
- The teacher pretests students to help create balanced student groups (10 minutes) and uses simple things like simple Italian cognates with English similarities, examples of simple grammatical concepts followed by multiple choice questions for correct Italian. Five to ten questions should give a broad range of innate ability.
- The teacher introduces research on the Web (20 minutes). The teacher will use multimedia setup or a laptop and projector to demonstrate. Search terms are discussed and some relevant strategies are introduced. In my Culinary Arts class, the demonstration included a failed search in English

on Italian cooking, which brought up recipes in English. The better way to search, it was shown, is to change the search engine to Italian first, by entering <http://www.google.it>, and then commence the search on culinary arts. Even so, it was discovered that most results are still in English. Finally, using Google Translate, the teacher shows how to enter the Italian word for what the students want: *arti culinarie*. This brings up all results in Italian, even in the English search engine. Students can then use Google Translate to get an approximation of the translation.

**First assignment.** Student groups are directed to find an article written in the Italian language, summarize it briefly and rate it for interest, information and the trustworthiness of the source on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. The teacher then discusses with the class the criteria for the article and its assessment. Citations in simple APA style are required. The students in these classes were also told that student names should be included in parentheses for anything they create, so that the teacher can easily identify students' work. After a short time, student voices became discernible and one group was warned that all students needed to participate equally when the teacher realized that most of the writing was being done by only two members of the group. The classes were then reminded that class presentations and lesson delivery would be done as a group, with each student playing an active role. The review can be done in English and then be translated using Google Translate. Students are asked to list the useful vocabulary words within the article. Students were told they could use Google Translate, but that they should check the translation against their textbooks.

This plan was used for both classes in order to accommodate new intermediate students and to gently establish a routine for the term. Students were divided into groups so they could share and cooperate. They were advised to read the week's lesson and work on the vocabulary and could use the school library or the computer lab to access the Internet if they had no access at home. In addition, the researcher-teacher acquired several older laptops that were used for group work during class, one for each group. Grayford (1989) suggests that "structured" group learning activities, that is group work with definite guidelines and

teacher monitoring, promotes a number of useful skills, including cooperation, leadership and negotiation.

*3.1.2. Lesson two: using search engines and selecting reading materials*

- **Objective.** The objective of this lesson is to connect what was learned from the first lesson to a new set of learning issues.
- Using PowerPoint plus projection of a live browser, the teacher demonstrates search engine strategies:
  - The students are required to figure out (Italian) words from the week's vocabulary lesson or from words learned so far, that could be of value to the student group. The teacher might use some vocabulary words in a sentence.
  - The students are asked to enter the least used word in common conversation or print (in their opinion) into the search engine first followed by the second and third least popular. For example, in English, if you want information about the best professional cooktop and oven you would use "cooktop", because it is seldom used for home ranges. By using quotation marks, the search engine is directed to find only the combination within the quotes, so the search for the best professional cooktop and oven would be written as: "cooktop and oven". This eliminates many possibilities. In the above case, adding professional will narrow results further.
  - The students are asked to either search these words or add one or two more key words. Google, and most other search engines, will search the first word you list and then search within the results sequentially on each of the rest.
  - Specify Web, video, image or whatever you want to see.

- Scroll through results and check out those that look interesting. Use Google Translate to read a bit of those that are under consideration. Meet with group, or call the other members to discuss possibilities or email them around until there is a consensus.
- The criteria for selection for this teacher-researcher's Italian Language classes are:
  - written in Italian;
  - between 300 and 1000 words, but complete, so it must not be a long article, but it can be a section of a longer article if it has a complete idea. One example might be something on training your dog and part one would be how to use commands. Subsequent parts may be used for future projects, if desired;
  - not overloaded with profanity;
  - uses at least 6-10 of the vocabulary words.
- The students are asked to copy the text and the link for citation (explain briefly why a citation is necessary). Note what search string was used.

The teacher uses the remainder of the class to talk about what students found. The teacher projects the URL on the screen and goes to the source. The class discusses the pros and cons of the choices. If the choice features all of the stated criteria, the teacher commends the student on the choice (the Culinary arts students used a lot of recipes and cooking videos).

Most students came back with very short items, but that was acceptable. The required vocabulary words were included in the first few assignments, because the most used words are those that they need to learn. At this point, I noticed that interest was waning, so I assembled the groups for the last ten minutes of class in order to introduce the next phase. The students compared what



they had found and decided which they would do first. The groups identified vocabulary words and portioned out the translation of the agreed upon text. Students were also assigned a short exercise from the textbook. This was explained as necessary, since the book was useful for this practice and as a resource. It was mentioned that the book might have some phrases that would be useful for search strings in finding interesting parallel materials and it certainly provided vocabulary words.

### 3.1.3. *Lesson three: how to create learning materials*

Class began with exchanged homework correction, and this was collected. A visual vocabulary warm-up was used for five minutes; the teacher intentionally used some humorous materials. This class was used for very detailed learning materials creation demonstration. The workshop format was used with the entire class. First what must be learned (task analysis) was introduced (Jonassen, Tessmer, & Hannum, 1999). Then the teacher and students connected this to how it can be learned by discussing learning styles and methods. Finally, these were connected to assessment, and the value of pre-assessment and post-assessment was discussed.

Once a useful task analysis was set, such as vocabulary, grammar elements, pronunciation and syntax, the students were led in a discussion of how these tasks might be accomplished. These were written on the whiteboard for reference. The teacher then showed different types of learning materials to find out what the groups of students liked to do. The task analysis was connected to the lesson plan and learning materials (Jonassen, 2004). Students discussed what they would learn by doing different things with the chosen material. Once everyone understood, then the students broke into groups to choose one or more lesson plans to create. Generally, students will need at least three types of learning materials to accomplish the various tasks in learning the language elements presented. It was felt necessary to discuss how to create matching assessments, both pre-assessment and post-assessment (Jonassen, 2004). Handouts had been prepared that included all these details for student information.

Teachers should be as interactive with the class as possible and reward close guesses with positive feedback. Any word or phrase that uses the proper rules also counts as a close guess. An example in English might be if an EFL student created a new word using the proper rules, such as “dividedly” for “separately”. In Italian some students tried taking English words and matching them with familiar Italian words and the teacher added points. Other students grabbed what they thought were Latin roots and tried them. Basically, participation should be rewarded at this point.

The teacher demonstrated the creation of word matches in several forms using connected words, words and pictures, including several words that use different and matching cognates. The class created six good lesson examples during one period, and more than half the vocabulary for the lesson and all the grammatical concepts were introduced during the session. The corrected translated articles from each group were used.

The teacher used the last six minutes of class to show how to use Google Translate to help:

- put in one word and translate;
- put in second word and translate;
- put in the two words together and translate;
- check the dictionary. Some translations are quite funny, Google is fairly good but not perfect.

**Assignment.** The teacher directs students to come to class prepared with a short lesson to work within their groups. By this time in this particular case, each group had developed a dynamic for working and leaders had emerged. However, with the requirement that each time written work was turned in or presented to the class, the individuals within the group who created each part were acknowledged in a reduced method of citation developed for these classes,

with just the student's name in parentheses following a segment. The groups had already selected their preferred article (with citation). Group translations were turned in. A second short exercise from the text was assigned. Some of the discussions about word meanings were quite interesting, as they involved cognates in English, but also the Italian context.

#### 3.1.4. *Lesson four: group lesson creation*

The class was organized into groups right away. Corrected translations were passed out plus a copy of the entire correct translation. Groups were instructed to decide upon and create one grammar lesson and one vocabulary lesson based upon the current lesson requirements in the textbook using their work. The researcher observed each group and used the last ten minutes of class to get oral reports on progress from each group.

**Assignment.** The teacher directs student groups to finish creating two lessons and be prepared to present them to the whole class. These lessons were projected, discussed, corrected, and then done as a class, with the creating group moderating. Students were introduced to simple Italian phrases for correction and discussion and these were passed out in printed form.

Since the class had five groups, one or two of these class activities had to be used on a subsequent day. The presenting group received feedback forms from the rest of the class to help them improve. These were based upon a short printed template distributed to the class. Student feedback did not affect the grades. This tended to create an environment of class cooperation, and even negative feedback took a positive form as directed on the handout. It is believed that positive peer feedback, even when critical of the work, raises the self-esteem of both parties (Brookhart, 2011; Lipnevich & Smith, 2009).

The teacher distributes the corrected copies of each lesson that were printed and passed out for written homework exercises: these were easy but reinforcing. Student groups were assigned another document, plus a very short exercise from the book. The students were informed that much more Italian was expected in

the assessments, and gradually they reached 100 percent Italian and improved in quality.

### 3.1.5. *Lessons five through ten*

For the next five lessons the above steps were repeated with new content. All lessons from the unit were completed in class or as homework. A brief unit exam was given. The teacher explained that due to her grading criteria the students would be allowed to eliminate the two worst exam scores from grading at the end of the term, with the exception of the mid-term and the final exam. With each subsequent lesson more and more Italian was used in class. By mid-term almost all the speaking in class was in Italian.

## 3.2. The term length

Different school systems have a different number of weeks in the term, and there may be more or fewer classes per week than in this case study. The nature of this project is such that it caters for these differences. Because there was a need for a midterm exam and a semester final exam, two classes were devoted to these. In addition, students were given a group project lesson to complete with introduction, lesson, criteria and assessment. The final term grade for each group applied to all group members as part of their final grade. They all seemed to have fun with this, and some of the lessons were a bit playful but still valid.

## 3.3. Assessment

Assessment can be done in a flexible manner. The researcher assessed the group work as one third of the grade, individual work as another third with the combination of the average of the quizzes after the two worst were removed, and the mid-term and final exams as the final third of the grade. Students understood this grading method and were comfortable with it. With group work worth one third, it has value because it will not unduly destroy a grade. In this manner, those students who perform very poorly in exams can still get an average grade, as can shy students.

### **3.4. Results**

After these two groups were taught using the new framework, the need-to-repeat exams dropped by more than 20 percent. It was still necessary to do two weeks of review beginning in the second year, but more than 80 percent of students in each class had achieved a 65 percent score or better. Scores above the 90 percent mark rose very slightly and scores above 80 percent rose by about 10 percent. The class average was 74 percent for the beginners and 78 percent for the intermediate level.

### **3.5. Student feedback**

Students were asked to rate their level of interest during the term on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest score. The average rate of interest was 4.2, which is .4 higher than other classes at the same level during previous years. The school administration felt that the use of very interesting materials, besides the textbook, made all the difference. By comparison, the students who learned using classical Italian movies scored their interest almost as high, (4.0) but their grades were not quite as high and a slightly higher percentage of students had to retake the final exam to get a passing grade. Feedback from students indicated a rise in their confidence levels and enrollment in the second year class was higher than previous years by a small margin, though this cannot be solely attributed to the 'teaching to learn' methodology.

Students indicated that they enjoyed the classes more using this method rather than just using textbooks, ordinary homework, class drills and exams. About one third of the students mentioned that group work helped them learn, because the group members cooperated in sharing knowledge and ideas.

The students did not mention that they had, effectively, learned a little of how to teach when they created their lessons and then directed a class with what they had created. However, teaching was actually what they were doing at the time. Some students mentioned that they had learned a great deal about how to learn. This rather supports the theory that teaching is the best way to learn ([Gartner](#),

Kohler, & Riessman, 1971). More than 80 percent of students said that finding their own materials was far more interesting than mere reliance on content in the textbook. Surprisingly, even students who had to retake the final exam indicated increased satisfaction and confidence.

It was noted that students were successfully engaged in the learning process and took an active part in creating and delivering the group lessons. After the first, somewhat tentative lessons were given by student groups, some of the groups became quite creative in how they ‘taught’ and they automatically explained why they did things the way they did in order to explain their own thinking.

It was evident by the time the third set of lessons was created that students were actually enjoying this process. A great deal of humor crept in as the term progressed. One lesson delivery included a short set of videos that the students created with free online cartoon software. The student showed an action and then spoke clearly in Italian about what the character was doing. She deliberately made a very wrong statement at one point and waited for the first objection. She then said, “I would give you extra points for listening”. That increased student attention. Other students included jokes and word play games. It was evident that students liked ‘playing’ with the language.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

From this research program, it is apparent that increasing student engagement increases participation and assessment levels. From the teacher’s observation, students were very interested in participating and assessment levels did rise from previous years with the same type of groups and when compared with other groups. Also, students were more engaged most of the time. Time allocation was an early problem, but the plans were adjusted to eliminate the issues. Homework levels increased as the term progressed and the use of Italian in class also increased. By the second term classes were conducted more than 90 percent in Italian.

Since the students' pass rate went up, it is assumed that this method had a positive effect upon students. It required slightly more work for the teacher at the beginning and required a more complicated assessment, but after the first three weeks, the teacher's workload was a bit less than usual, and classes seemed more productive.

The students liked using material they found and were quite interested in what other groups found. There were also lively discussions about what kinds of lessons worked best and which types of assessments actually showed progress. As the students learned about teaching, they invariably also learned about learning.

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