

In this article, originally published in ENGLISH TEACHING professional, Andrew Stokes look at how we can equip our students to research effectively on the Internet.

# ICT - study skills and the Web

There's a pleasing symmetry to researching Internet research on the Internet. The web section of Clarity's academic study skills and IELTS package, STUDY SKILLS Success throws up all sorts of new and interesting skills that students of all ages need to get to grips with. It's important to remember that the principles of research are as relevant to a primary school project on butterflies as they are for an academic assignment on Cervantes; it's only the level of sophistication that varies.

Firstly, in order to teach these skills with confidence, you need to have a real understanding of how the Internet works. For an excellent overview, fire up your browser (you'll be needing it as you go through this article!) and go to <http://library.albany.edu/internet/internet.html>

This clarifies all those terms which are familiar but fuzzy, such as *http*, *FTP*, *telnet* and *discussion group* and puts the different elements of the Internet into perspective. Having digested this, you are now equipped to move on to the three main topic areas.

## 1. Where to find information

The two main ways of finding information on the Internet are to use a search engine (for example Altavista, Google or Dogpile) or to go to a subject directory, such as Academicinfo.net, a site which refers you to content reviewed by a subject expert. The sites referred to by subject directories should be academically respectable and tend to be for higher level learners, but because they are individually reviewed they are often few in number. On the other hand, the search engines link to sites indiscriminately and you may have to wade through huge amounts of rubbish before you find something that is worth reading.

To illustrate the difference between these two sources - and this is an exercise you could try with your students - try searching each for *Cervantes* and *butterflies*. I couldn't find anything on Cervantes in the one subject directory I tried - my next step might be to try others - but there was a link to a scholarly site on insects, which contained a section on butterflies. In contrast, the search engine Google threw up 420,000 results for *Cervantes* and 1,950,000 for *butterfly*. How on earth do I know which of this huge number of sites is going to be useful? This leads us on to the next topic...

## 2. Evaluating a website

Unlike books, which have been through an editorial process, the Web is a self-publishing medium. Anyone with a computer, a telephone line and a few basic skills can use it to disseminate information on topics from fox hunting to craniology. Often the identity of the author is concealed: is he a raving madman or an eminent scholar? A student needs to judge the nature of the website, the target audience, the intentions of the author and the relevance and accuracy of the material. Interestingly, this is where traditional reading comprehension skills come in useful, and we can encourage our students to ask the same questions they would direct at print material:

- Who is the author? (A government department? A company? A pressure group? A respectable organization? A dangerous nutcase?)
- What is the author's purpose? (To make money? To entertain? To educate? To persuade you to accept new ideas? To self-publicize?)
- Who are the intended readers? (Anyone? Children? Language learners? Day traders? Shania Twain fans?)

A website evaluation worksheet produced by the State of Victoria and aimed at more academic research can be found at <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/internet/workshet.htm> (Type this url exactly, spelling mistakes and all!)

It would be relatively straightforward (and quite fun!) to set up your own activity where you choose three or four websites and draw up a list of questions for students to answer on each one. If you have website-building skills you could include a bogus site of your own!

### ICT Tip

Study Skills Success has now been published. Visit [www.IELTSpractice.com](http://www.IELTSpractice.com) and click into the Research section to view worksheets on a variety of topics including using search engines and evaluating websites.

## 3. Plagiarism

Which teacher has not been submitted a penetratingly intelligent and grammatically perfect essay by an elementary student? At least in the old days they'd have to go to the effort of copying it out of a book; nowadays it takes just a few seconds to cut and paste. The most common response is for teachers to tell students that they won't get away with it: "I will know!!!". But it may be appropriate to take a more positive approach. After all, I want my students to enter and operate in the authentic English environment of the Web, and it therefore seems more logical to say, "Yes, go to the Web by all means, but if you use material you find there, you need to note:

1. the full website address
2. the date you visited the website (websites change!)
3. the author (if any)."

The criteria can be anything from a simple note of the URL to a full citation; the objective is for students to behave in an intelligent and responsible manner.

### Website reference

1. Introduction to the Internet:  
<http://library.albany.edu/internet/internet.html>
2. Example of a subject directory:  
[www.academicinfo.net](http://www.academicinfo.net)
3. Website evaluation worksheet:  
<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/internet/workshet.htm>
4. More worksheets on Web-based research:  
<http://www.ieltspractice.com/research.html>

Clarity has a mission to help teachers integrate ICT successfully into their teaching. Please contact us at any time for advice on which programs to use and how to use them effectively with your students.

