

On Information Literacy for the University Foreign Language Teachers in China

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Abstract

At present, the university foreign language teachers in China face the transition from the traditional classroom to the modernized classroom and the changes of the teaching models. Especially, a large amount of the daily teaching work of many university foreign language teachers involve acquiring and using information to solve problems, advance teaching knowledge, and so on. Yet enormous numbers of hours are wasted every day by the foreign language teachers who lack the sophisticated skills to get the right information when they need it and to use it effectively when they have it. This article discusses the definition of the concept information literacy, expounds the developmental background of the concept information literacy, and focuses on the importance of information literacy for the university foreign language teachers and the basic contents of information literacy skills and its basic requirements for the university foreign language teachers. Through the discussion, the author tries to encourage the university presidents to help cultivate information literacy for the university foreign language teachers in China.

Key words: Information; Information literacy; Information literacy education; Information literacy skill; Internet; Foreign language education; Foreign language teacher; China

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INTRODUCTION

At the present time, network-based technology has brought an amazing increase in the number of innovations in foreign language teaching classrooms in China. Through network-based technology, university foreign language teachers and learners can do many things they could not even dream of before. They can obtain large amount of language materials from the WWW, the largest database in the world, they can communicate with their far-off native-speaking key pals within minutes by Internet. The university foreign language teachers in China are meeting many difficulties for the transition from the traditional classroom to the modernized classroom and the changes of the teaching means.

However, some foreign language teachers are still short of information literacy up to now. Here is a true story. One day, one of English teachers with doctoral degree in our foreign language school, who graduated from one famous foreign language university in China, came to my office. At that time, I was searching some information resources on internet in my office. He wondered at what I was retrieving some special information on Internet, and told me that he didn't know how to obtain some special information resources for his teaching and research on Internet. I was really surprised at his information literacy.

From my story, we can see that it is a very hot question that how to cultivate foreign language teachers' information literacy in China. Especially the information literacy education for the university foreign language teachers in the western part of China will be very necessary. Therefore, we should further discuss something detailed about information literacy.

DEFINITION OF INFORMATION LITERACY

In 1974, Paul G. Zurkowski, chairman of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, used

the phrase to describe the “ techniques and skills” known by the information literate “for utilizing the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in molding information solutions to their problems”.

Subsequently a number of efforts were made to better define the concept and its relationship to other skills and forms of literacy. Although other educational goals, including traditional literacy, computer literacy, library skills, and critical thinking skills, were related to information literacy and important foundations for its development, information literacy itself was emerging as a distinct skill set and a necessary key to one’s social and economic well-being in an increasing complex information society (Kulthau, 1987).

Boekhorst (2003), from the Netherlands, finds that all definitions and descriptions of information literacy presented over the year can be summarized in three concepts:

- The ICT concept: Information literacy refers to the competence to use ICT to retrieve and disseminate information.
- The information (re)sources concept: information literacy refers to the competence to find and use information independently or with the aid of intermediaries.
- The information process concept: information literacy refers to the process of recognizing information need, retrieving, evaluating, using and disseminating of information to acquire or extend knowledge. This concept includes both the ICT and the information (re) sources concept and persons are considered as information systems that retrieve, evaluate, process and disseminate information to make decisions to survive, for self-actualization and development.

He also sees the process of becoming information literate as a lifelong endeavor that should be started at primary school and be a part of formal training in all phases and all subject areas during the whole education process and suggests the consideration of information literacy/illiteracy in information-rich versus information-poor context (Boekhorst, 2003).

Therefore, the idea of information literacy, emerging with the advent of information technologies in the early 1970s, has grown, taken shape and strengthened to become recognized as the critical literacy for the twenty-first century. Sometimes interpreted as one of a number of literacy, information literacy is also described as the overarching literacy is inextricably associated with information practices and critical thinking in the information and communication technology environment (Bruce, 2002).

IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION LITERACY FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Now, information technology offers new opportunities to restructure the learning and knowledge transfer environment. The web and e-learning technologies also redefine the geographic boundaries of the traditional foreign language teaching such as a university campus, expanding it beyond city, country and national boundaries. This means that we will see an increasing number of courses designed for delivery over the web to as non-traditional group of students, many of them located off campus. In addition, the web is increasingly being used to aid traditionally taught courses on campus. Especially many important information resources will be exploited by the university foreign language teachers to support their academic researches.

So, information problem-solving skills become paramount, because information literacy is the ability to “know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them” (American Library Association [ALA] 1989). This need to know not just content but also the process of learning is supported, not only by the exploding amount of information but also by new understandings of cognitive science. Recent studies in cognitive science refute the notion that content comes before process, recognizing that the process of accessing, evaluating, and using information is integral to understanding content. The information literate teachers will also be able to select and use resources most appropriate to multiple intelligences and learning styles (Warmiessel & McCade, 1997).

In one word, the foreign language teachers cannot prepare their students to be information literate unless they themselves understand how to find and use information. The university foreign language teachers must learn to make meaning from the complex and mountainous arrays of data easily available through countless information resources. This requires our university foreign language teachers to have information literacy. The information literacy has become a basic requirement for the university foreign language teachers to have a good command of information technologies and skills to teach foreign languages well in China. No doubt, the information literacy plays a more and more important role in the foreign language teaching in China.

SKILLS OF INFORMATION LITERACY

Information literacy processes have become increasingly complex in the twenty-first century with the explosion of online information output and resources. The

foreign language teachers in our country must learn how to acquire, manage and analyze large quantities of information from multiple sources and do it quickly. The expansion of information and knowledge is moving at such a pace that the abilities to quickly locate relevant information from disparate sources, and to just as quickly form a coherent whole have become required skills for most workers in our primarily knowledge-based society (Fitzwter & Geesaman, 2003).

In fact, information literacy is directly related to critical thinking skills which entail the ability “to gather and assess relevant information” as well as “problem solving abilities.” (Paul & Elder, 2000). Whilst there is growing advocacy for information literacy skills in the universities foreign language teachers, comparatively little is known about how it is experienced by those who use information. The various basic contents of information literacy skills and the basic requirements that the university foreign language teachers should know and need here are drawn as following:

Information Gathering Skill. In order to finish their own study, teaching and research, the university foreign language teachers will be able to adopt different tools and means to extensively gathering information through various information resources and information channels both on Internet and in libraries, especially by advanced information techniques to confront new situations, and to deal with those situations, and to deal with those situations on the basis of being equipped with a process for finding (and using) the necessary information.

Information Selecting Skill. According to their own aims and requirements, the university foreign language teachers will be able to base on a great deal of information resources that they have gathered to analyze, compare, identify and choose the information that they will use. At the same time, the teachers is involved in evaluation and analysis, whilst the information presents itself uniquely to them. Especially, the university foreign language teachers will build up a personal knowledge base in a special area of their interest.

Information Processing Skill. The university foreign language teachers will be able to seriously research on and scientifically rearrange information after they select some information resources both on Internet and in libraries. Maybe, the university foreign language teachers can use various media to bring information within their sphere of influence and to establish using computers to allow storage and retrieved when necessary.

Information Utilizing Skill. The university foreign language teachers will be able to utilize information to solve practical problems and effectively apply information to their study and teaching so that they can smoothly finish their teaching and researching tasks. So, the university foreign language teachers should know information sources and their structure, and can use

information sources independently, either flexibly or via an intermediary, when meeting any difficulties in making-decision and solving-problems.

Information Communicating Skill. The university foreign language teachers will be able to get the information they need in making informal and formal information communication with the others (foreigners or Chinese students) during the practical social activities including teaching, researching and meeting. Especially, the university foreign language teachers should have a very strong intercultural communication competence and make contact with different peoples with different cultural backgrounds as successfully as possible by means of information telecommunication and other new information technologies that they have known or will know.

Information Evaluating Skill. The university foreign language teachers will be able to know the future development and trend in their own separate subjects and academic fields that they study or teach on the base of the present information they have gotten. Therefore, the evaluation ability is about how new insights are gained through analysis of the all kinds of information they got. Although people describe this as a mysterious process which they cannot explain, some describe it as activity of the mind. What is more important is that “new knowledge or information” is recognized as the “evaluation” is recognized as the contributing factor to effective information use.

In sum, the university foreign language teachers’ information literacy skills will enable them to develop methods in finding out the information that they need and knowing how information comes to be communicated, sifted, absorbed and changed qualitatively transforming it into new knowledge. And then, the university foreign language teachers’ information literacy skills will be fit to the requirements of their study, teaching and researching in the Internet information age.

CONCLUSION

Information literacy is not a new concept for us. But, information literacy is a way of knowing how to deal with information, a way of finding out about information resources, and a way of interacting with information. Information literacy skills have become an important communicative skills for today’s university foreign language teachers in China. Although information literacy has become an established curriculum for undergraduates in many institutions of higher education in China, the university foreign language teachers also need to be taught how to gather, select, process, utilize, communicate and evaluate by different teaching models, and they need frequent practice with doing these so as to effectively use that information for the issue or problem. Unless taught these basic skill, the university foreign language teachers

will grab some useful pieces of information that they find on the Internet or in the libraries so as to do their job better.

Therefore, the university foreign language teachers should have known the contents of information literacy to the teaching-learning process. However, integration of information literacy into teacher preparation and development has not occurred for most of universities in China. In moving towards this goal, the author thinks the first is to strengthen information literacy education for the university foreign language teachers, and the second is to let university leaders pay much more attention to the training of information literacy skills. In this way, the qualifications of the university foreign language teachers in China would be really adapted to the new teaching and researching environment with the development of information technologies in this century.

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