Chapter XIX
Improving Online Readability and Information Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter integrates important challenges of how to improve accessibility, readability, and learnability of online content. It is concerned with issues of how to create effective and enjoyable contents for online learning that is linguistically accessible, textually comprehensible, and readable for foreign language learners. Information literacy is an umbrella term encompassing computer, critical, digital, and media literacy. Yet a crucial area for research is the overlap of traditional reading literacy and new forms of online and digital library literacy. This area seems to have been largely overlooked and under-researched. This chapter elucidates how various threads can be more skillfully woven together so as to enhance online reading and language learning skills. The aim is to gain insights that enhance online learning and integrate information literacies in foreign language education.

INTRODUCTION

To handle vast volumes of data readily available online at just a click, global citizens of our multilingual electronic age need to develop information literacy skills. They include the ability to search for, recognize, and evaluate specific information in various fields, and then use it effectively for learning and life. In this chapter we aim to discuss improving electronic information literacy. We discuss the crucial importance of improving text readability in order to achieve what Valenza (2006, p.1) labels optimal integration and application of online tools and information for "problem-solving and decision-making skills in situations learners face in all their subject areas and in their lives beyond our classrooms."

Definitions of information literacy have involved five evolving concepts encompassing computer literacy, critical thinking and informa-

tion skills, Information Technology (IT) literacy, learning how to learn (or lifelong learning) literacies, and library or digital media literacies. These have been well distinguished and clarified by Bruce (1997) and Hoppner (2004). While all of these are interrelated skills mutually contributing to the development of overall information literacy, the most basic literacy skill of reading, whether online or in print, seems to have been strangely overlooked in much discussion of these issues. This article is an attempt to remedy that, and to point to how an examination of reading and vocabulary skills and readability levels of readers and texts, whether in print or online, must always be considered of prime importance in any discussion of how to help improve information and language literacies.

The need for easy, quick, and reliable readability checking for English reading texts has recently become more pronounced and apparent. Whether assessing fiction or non-fiction for either Extensive or Intensive Reading (ER or IR) use, both language learners and teachers are in real need of helpful, user-friendly ways of assessing the readability levels of both kinds of text, as well as the reading levels of the learners themselves.

In particular there is a great need for those using or designing materials for online learning to understand how to better assess and improve the readability of any text for learners of limited reading and vocabulary proficiency from various language backgrounds. A quick survey of current online readability programs and research shows that a very large gap exists for work in this important field. It is crucial for teachers and language learning programs or E-Learning Web site developers to understand this field, especially if they want foreign language learners to be able to understand and access information on their sites effectively.

When we consider how to improve the readability of online text, there are four major related, but distinct constructs to consider. These are: the reading ability or level of the user; the readability level of a text; its vocabulary level; and readability assessment tests, scales or indices. Regardless of what types of reading level tests are used, however, for those truly concerned with trying to help learners, the most important consideration is how to make online or print texts more readily accessible and therefore more comprehensible for them. Since reading tests and readability indices are a combination of vocabulary and comprehension tasks combining semantic and syntactical complexity, density and word length, one of the most important related pedagogical factors is to be able to assess this fourth factor, namely the *vocabulary level of particular texts,* in ways that will help the online users to be more effective in their teaching or learning. This article is focused on how to do that online.

This chapter discusses three types of readability, compares assessing that of print versus online materials, and gives an example of how the author designed an Online Reading Course for graduate engineering students, which assessed these issues in enough detail to provide language teachers with both principles and a model for designing online reading courses. Many reading teachers are looking for helpful services to be able to quickly assess any print or online text's readability. Thus showing how to do free, instant online readability checks as this chapter does, can contribute greatly to improving language learners' levels of comprehension and motivation, known to be closely related. Better matching of material appropriate to readers' levels is crucial in language classes, whether one is using an intensive or extensive reading approach, as well as for achieving maximum listening comprehension.

In addition, this article will provide strategic Web site links organized to help the reader do text analysis and readability checks for any text to help improve online readability. By improving accessibility to online lexical and concordancing tools, use of such recommended online programs can help to make any Web site or online text readily comprehensible input for learners from any

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