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Internet as an education aid in teaching foreign languages

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Abstract

The importance of the Internet in teaching foreign languages in today's language teaching settings becomes more and more. The role of this media becomes more important by helping students to practice their language skills as well as becoming familiar with the culture of the language community, especially when there is no immediate access to the native speakers.

This paper aims to present the different uses of the Internet in teaching foreign languages to the adult English speakers. The usefulness of this modern education aid is shown in a case study of adult English speakers in the Australian Defence Force School of Languages, where the students learn Persian as a foreign language in an intensive 46 weeks course to become a proficient linguist in the language. These students are exposed to the Internet on a daily basis to get help with listening, speaking, reading, writing as well as cultural orientation. How the Internet is used for each macro skill is explained in the paper in detail.

1. Introduction

Internet is one of the most recent and advanced tools in education which has been provided to the education environment by the advance of technology. Although there are some downsides to having access to the Internet for students and learners, if it is used effectively and under teacher supervision, it can be a good source and tool in delivering education.

This is especially the case with teaching languages. The Internet can be useful with any skill area in learning a foreign or second language. It is a great resource in practicing language skills. However, it is more effective with some skills more than others. For example, in speaking and listening it is more effective than in translation. It is also a good resource for the teacher to find lesson materials and resources. It also helps the students to become familiar with different aspects of the culture of the language they are learning. In the following pages, the way we use Internet as an educational tool in teaching foreign language is explained and then as an evidence for its usefulness, a case study of our language course in the ADF School of Languages has been introduced.

2. Language skills and internet usage

Internet can be used for enhancing different skills in language learning. We use the following Internet resources to enhance the skills of students:

- Online TV channels and radio stations
- Online language courses
- Chat rooms
- Newspapers & periodicals
- Cultural presentations
- Learning language related components

2.1 Online TV channels and radio stations

Language learners need a lot of aids and resources to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills especially when they are learning a foreign language in an environment where they have no immediate access to the language community. For example, in our case, the students learn Persian as a foreign language in Australia. Their only resources for speaking are the teachers, tapes and CDs. There is usually no other native speaker available to practice these skills with them. However, by the introduction of the Internet, this task has become easier and easier. The first important aid of the Internet is having access to a large range of audiovisual materials from radio, TV to video and audio clips in the target language. The students can listen to the radio and TV programs on the net, as well. They can also record radio and TV programs and news items and then play it back to see how native speakers speak the language and get familiar with unusual phrases and idioms. They can also listen and watch programs about specific cultural aspects of the target language and get familiar with the culture, as the role of culture in learning a second language is emphasized in today's literature (e.g. Breen, 2001; Candlin, 2001; Cleghorn & Rollnick, 2002; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; and McKay, 2003)

In summary, the following are the different uses of these resources:

- Watching live and recorded programs on online TV
- Listening to programs on radio
- Recording programs on tape or MP3 player for the use at home
- Watching video clips about different cultural events: celebrations, music and traditions of each ethnic group within the language community
- Audio clips are usually in MP3 format and easy to download and listen in an MP3 player.

2.2. Online language courses

Online language courses are another source for language practice. Online courses can be useful to the students as an extra aid to the course, although they are not tailored to their specific needs. These courses can be easily accessed on any language by searching the net. These courses usually include audio-visual materials which are useful for students especially for their pronunciation practice. There are language teaching courses for kids which can also be helpful for adults as the vocabulary and the structure of language items to be taught are simple. We ask our students to use these courses as supplementary tools for their language learning in their spare time at home.

2.3 Chat rooms

Nowadays, there are many chat sites for languages on the Internet. These are either text or voice chat and even video chat. The easiest and most accessible of these is the text chat where the students write to the native speakers. We have tried these chat sites for our students and found it very useful in developing speaking, reading and writing skills and cultural awareness.

When a student chats with a native speaker, he is automatically corrected when he spells a word wrong or makes a grammatical mistake. Thus, it is a good virtual tutorial room for the language practice. It is in fact a continuous trial and error learning process which helps students the autocorrect themselves continuously. When the student's sentence is a literal translation of an English sentence into the target language and not a genuine sentence in that language, again the native speaker on the chat room corrects him and says that this is not a usual sentence in the language. There are so many idioms and phrases which are used by native speakers of the language but they hardly are included in the lesson materials. Through these chat sites, the students become familiar with these idioms and phrases and most important is that they learn how to use them in a context. At the same time, the students' reading and writing skill is being practiced and since their chat partner is waiting for their reply, the speed of reading and writing is automatically increased. Culturally, they become familiar with the turn taking habits, addressing different people, greetings, invitations and so many cultural related issues.

2.4 Newspapers & periodicals

Newspapers and periodicals are also very useful resources for practicing reading and writing especially for languages like Persian where the script is non Roman. Since the students have no access to the hard copy newspapers and periodicals in Australia, they can use the Internet on a daily basis to get online newspapers in the script. They can read them and print them for further practice on reading and writing in their classes. They have also access to local papers and updates news updates and information in the script.

2.5 Cultural presentations

Language students can prepare different presentations on cultural aspects of the language by using different culture sites which usually contain audio, visual and written materials. They can become familiar with cultural events, costumes, and traditions related to the target language. They also have opportunities in downloading plenty of materials and prepare a power point presentation in the class.

2.6 Learning culture related language components

The close relation between language and culture has been known in the related literature for a long time. It also noted that language is only understood when it is placed in its cultural setting (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996). A realistic teaching of a second or a foreign language takes place with the introduction to the culture of the language community. There are some language components which are interrelated with the culture of speakers of the language more than other components. These cultural components of a language have particular meanings which are adopted by the speech community. Learning these components takes the learner beyond the artificial text-like aspect of the language and instead makes the learner an insider in the language community.

The culture related components which can be learned using the Internet are as follows:

A. Greetings

To learn greetings in the language, one should become familiar with the culture. For example, using a singular second person pronoun to call strangers or people higher in age or position is impolite and sometimes is regarded as an insult.

B. Formalities

It seems formalities in one language are more than in other languages. As it is expected, the literal meaning of these words and phrases are different from their meaning which is used in formalities. The learner needs to become familiar with the context in which they are used and try to relate the meaning to the context. However, sometimes the same phrase has different usage in different contexts of politeness. Thus, the learner should be able to guess the relevant meaning based on the specific context. Here is an example of such a formality which has so many different uses in different contexts. The phrase is *befarmayin*. It has several meaning based on different contexts:

- How can I help you?
- Context: e.g., when you enter a shop and say hello and the shopkeeper says: *befarmäyin*.
- Come in
- Context: e.g., when you knock the door and the person inside says *befarmäyin*.
- Here you are

- Context: e.g., when you are going to pay the money for your shopping in the shop, you give the money to him and you say *befarmäyin*.
- Please go on, continue
- Context: e.g., when you are talking and someone interrupts, and then the listener tells you *befarmäyin*.
- Take a seat
- Context: e.g., when you enter somewhere and the person inside offers you a seat and says *befarmäyin*.
- How can I help you (on the phone)
- Context: e.g., you are answering a call and after picking the phone up you say: *alo befarmäyin*.
- After you
- Context: e.g., when you are entering somewhere with someone else, you say to him *befarmäyin*.

As we see, the only way to get familiar with different uses of this phrase is to encounter the native speaker, and the virtual communication by the Internet the best tool to do this while there is no native speaker around.

C: Idioms

Idioms are also language based and culture related. There are some idioms in English which have no equivalent in this group of languages because of cultural differences, and there are some culture related idioms in these languages which have no equivalent in English. Here are some examples of idioms in Persian:

- Agar jaaye to budam
- If I was in your place
- If I were you.

- Taklifam ro roshan kon
- Lit my task!
- Tell me what to do.

- Delam baraat tang shode
- My heart has become tight for you
- I miss you.

- Jaatun khaali bud
- Your place was empty
- You were missed.

- Manzuret chiye?
- What is your intention?
- What do you mean?

- Ki be ki ye
- Who is to whom?
- Who cares?

As with formalities, these idioms are better learned through practice with native speakers and thus chat sites are useful tools for this practice.

D. Swear words

Understanding swear words in a language is a delicate matter, as the learner should learn both the idiomatic meaning of them and at the same time become familiar with the cultural background of the word. Thus, finding a close equivalent for swear words in English and trying to explain them within the context will help language learners to understand them. One swear word is Persian which is very insulting is calling someone *khar* 'donkey' which is not necessarily insulting in English. Thus, to understand this swear word, one should be familiar with the culture and the reason behind it. In Persian culture, donkey is the symbol of stupidity, and thus calling people as donkey is more insulting than calling them stupid!

E. Proverbs

Proverbs are also among those most delicate language elements. To understand them in the target language, one should be proficient enough, and be familiar with the background cultural information. The following are examples of Persian proverbs:

- Bakhiye be aabdugh zadan
- Stitching yoqurt drink
- To kick the wind

- Buye halvash miyaad
- You can smell his Halva
- He has one foot in the grave

- Pul paaru mikone
- He is shoveling money
- He is very rich

F. Jokes

Most Jokes and humorous texts are culture dependant. To be able to understand the meaning behind them, we should understand the cultural background. Here are two examples of Persian jokes which can not be understood by English speakers unless they become familiar with the related culture:

Example:

- A guy dropped some coins in the charity box on the street corner. He wanted to cross the street, a car hit him and he fell on the ground. While he was screaming of the pain, he saw another guy is going to put some money on the same charity box. He shouted: Do not waste your money, it is not working!
- Background information: It is believed that giving money to charity provides one a safeguard against accidents and illness and other misfortunes.

2.6 Internet as a teacher aid

As well as helping students in learning the language, the Internet can be an invaluable tool for the language teacher, too. It can help teachers with so many aspects of teaching:

- Getting listening materials like audio-visual materials from Internet sites
- Having access to newspapers and other Internet resources for reading and writing classes
- Getting up to date materials to use for interpreting and translating classes
- Being able to revise and tailor the materials based on the specific needs of students
- Having access to cultural materials and pictures to introduce in cultural orientation classes
- Being able to get ideas from other institution teaching the same language
- Having access to online books, video and audio tapes and CD ROMs and other language related materials
- Being in touch with previous and current students through e mail or chat facilities on the net to keep their language proficiency up to date
- Informing the students about availability of the new materials
- Putting necessary language maintenance materials in the School web site for students' access.

4 Case study

4.1 Subjects

The ADF School of Languages trains linguists in different languages for Australian Defence Forces. The students are adult military people whose native language is English. They are selected for the courses based on passing a language aptitude test. The courses are intensive and run for 46 weeks. The students attend classes from Monday to Friday, six periods each day. At the end of the course, they become a proficient linguist in the language. The assessments are task-based on each skill area of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, translating and interpreting.

4.2 The target language

Persian is an Indo-European language which is spoken mainly in three countries: Its Farsi version is spoken in Iran, Dari is spoken in Afghanistan and Tajik is spoken in Tajikistan. All of these three variants of the language are mutually intelligible, although they all are considered to be different languages.

4.3 Course Training Outcome

The expected course training outcome for these courses is as follows:

Week 14

Speaking

- 1+ *Limited.* Some effective communication is usually achieved, but speaker displays limited range and accuracy. Vocabulary is limited to familiar topics/functions and some specialist areas, enabling the conveying of general information, but significantly limited outside that range; errors of word choice may be frequent. Speaker can accurately produce most simply structured sentences; some errors of word order may occur, and influence of English sentence patterns may be evident even in simpler constructions. Pronunciation may be hesitant or contain errors. Speech may seem awkward and disjointed, with limited flexibility in linking statements or changing direction of conversation.

Listening

- 1+ *Simple.* Listener displays **accurate, complete and specific comprehension** of material consisting mainly of simple narration / description of events / processes / things, or simple reporting of statements / opinions, on mainly tangible / concrete subject-matter. Structure of material is simple and easy to follow, and complexity of reasoning is low. Vocabulary is limited to familiar topics / functions and some specialist areas, and meaning is usually readily apparent; elements of a more informal / familiar style may be present. Sentence patterns tend to be mainly of simpler types, but all have clear structures. Material is delivered more slowly and clearly than normal, and in a standard accent.

Reading

- 1 *Very simple.* Reader displays **accurate, complete and specific comprehension** of material limited to very simple narration / description of events / processes / things, or very simple reporting of statements / opinions, on very tangible / concrete subject-matter. Material has very simple and readily apparent structure, with little complexity of reasoning. Vocabulary is clearly limited to familiar topics / functions, and meaning is readily apparent. Material consists only of simple sentences with very clear structures, and some isolated groups of words. Material uses only standard printed form of script / characters, clearly presented.

Writing

- 1 *Very limited.* Writer can convey only simple surface meanings, and communication may sometimes break down. Vocabulary is clearly limited, comprising mainly basic vocabulary on familiar topics/functions, and errors of word choice are frequent. Writer can accurately produce only formulaic sequences and simple sentences; errors of word order may be frequent, and sentence patterns tend to be significantly influenced by English. Writing tends to be short, with little ability to extend or link statements. Spelling / punctuation / use of capitals tends to be inconsistent; writer can spell out some simple unknown words.

Week 30

Speaking

- 2 *Partially effective.* Speaker is quite effective when working within most general and familiar/specialist topics, but otherwise quality of communication is inconsistent. Speaker has enough vocabulary to convey meaning on most general functions, and familiar/specialist topics, but is limited outside that range; can differentiate many common shades of meaning. Speaker achieves accuracy in most uncomplicated constructions, but occasional errors of word order may occur, and some English influence is evident in sentence patterns. Pronunciation may show noticeable English influence, but few errors or hesitations occur. Pauses or hesitations do not significantly inhibit interaction, and speaker has some flexibility in linking statements or changing the direction of conversation.

Listening

- 2 *Straightforward.* Listener displays **accurate, complete and specific comprehension** of material consisting largely of narration / description of events / processes / things, or straightforward reporting of statements / opinions. Subject-matter is mainly tangible / concrete, although some simple conceptual material may be present. Overall structure of material is clear, but some moderate complexity of reasoning is possible. Vocabulary covers most general functions and familiar / specialist topics; significant elements of

a more informal / familiar style may be present. Material may include a significant proportion of more complicated sentence structures, some quite long, but all generally clear. Material is delivered slightly more slowly and clearly than normal, and may be in a slightly non-standard accent.

Reading

- 1+** *Simple.* Reader displays **accurate, complete and specific comprehension** of material consisting mainly of simple narration / description of events / processes / things, or simple reporting of statements / opinions, on mainly tangible / concrete subject-matter. Structure of material is simple and easy to follow, and complexity of reasoning is low. Vocabulary is limited to familiar topics / functions and some specialist areas, and meaning is usually readily apparent; elements of a more informal / familiar style may be present. Sentence patterns tend to be mainly simpler types, but all have clear structures. Material normally uses standard printed form of script / characters, but may use clearly presented non-standard or hand-written form.

Writing

- 1+** *Limited.* Some effective communication is usually achieved, but writer displays limited range and accuracy. Vocabulary is limited to familiar topics/functions and some specialist areas, enabling the conveying of general information, but significantly limited outside that range; errors of word choice may be frequent. Writer can accurately produce most simply structured sentences; some errors of word order may occur, and influence of English sentence patterns may be evident even in simpler constructions. Writing may seem awkward and disjointed, with limited flexibility in linking or extending statements. Spelling / punctuation / use of capitals is usually correct, but may be inconsistent; writer can spell out many unknown words.

Translating

- 1+** *Simple.* Translator is able to **comprehend, and translate accurately** and with adequate expression, material consisting mainly of simple narration / description of events / processes / things, or simple reporting of statements / opinions, on mainly tangible / concrete subject-matter. Structure of material is simple and easy to follow, and complexity of reasoning is low. Vocabulary is limited to familiar topics / functions and some specialist areas, and meaning is usually readily apparent; elements of a more informal / familiar style may be present. Material consists mainly of shorter sentences with fairly simple and clear structures. Material normally uses standard printed form of script / characters, but may use clearly presented non-standard or hand-written form.

Interpreting

- 1+** *Simple.* Interpreter can **comprehend, and interpret accurately** and with adequate expression, material consisting mainly of simple narration / description of events / processes / things, or simple reporting of statements / opinions, on mainly tangible / concrete subject-matter. Structure of material is simple and easy to follow, and complexity of reasoning is low. Vocabulary is limited to familiar topics / functions and some specialist areas, and meaning is usually readily apparent; elements of a more informal / familiar style may be present. Material consists mainly of shorter sentences with fairly simple and clear structures. Material is delivered more slowly than normal, and in a standard accent; segments do not exceed 20 words.

Week 46

Speaking

- 2+** *Generally effective.* Speaker is able to convey meaning on a range of general and specialist topics, although attempts to convey more subtle / conceptual information may be unsuccessful. Speaker has enough vocabulary to speak on general and specialist topics, but not always with high precision or clarity; and successfully differentiates many shades of meaning. Range of grammatical patterns is adequate for most interactions, and speaker routinely achieves accuracy in uncomplicated constructions, although some English influence may be evident. Pronunciation may show some English influence, but errors rarely cause any problems. Pauses or hesitations do not significantly inhibit interaction, and speaker has moderately good flexibility in linking statements or changing the direction of conversation.

Listening

- 2+** *Mainly uncomplicated and/or tangible.* Listener displays **accurate, complete and specific comprehension** of material consisting primarily of narration / description, or reporting of others' words, although presentation may be slightly conceptual or analytical. Subject-matter is generally tangible / concrete, but moderately conceptual material may also be present. Overall structure of material is generally clear; reasoning may be moderately complex. Vocabulary covers a range of general and specialist topics; style ranges from formal to informal / familiar. Some of the sentence structures may be quite long or sophisticated. Material is delivered with normal clarity and at a normal pace, and may be in a slightly non-standard accent.

Reading

- 2** *Straightforward.* Reader displays **accurate, complete and specific comprehension** of material consisting largely of narration / description of events / processes / things, or straightforward reporting of statements / opinions. Subject-matter is mainly tangible / concrete, although some simple conceptual material may be present. Overall structure of material is clear, but some moderate complexity of reasoning is possible. Vocabulary covers most general functions and familiar / specialist topics; significant elements of a more informal / familiar style may be present. Material may include a significant proportion of more complicated sentence structures, some quite long, but all generally clear. Material normally uses standard printed form of script / characters, but may use

clearly presented non-standard or hand-written form.

Writing

- 2 *Partially effective.* Writer is quite effective when working within most general and familiar/specialist topics, but otherwise quality of communication is inconsistent. Writer has enough vocabulary to convey meaning on most general functions, and familiar/specialist topics, but is limited outside that range; can differentiate many common shades of meaning. Writer achieves accuracy in most uncomplicated constructions, but occasional errors of word order may occur, and some English influence is evident in sentence patterns. Above paragraph level, writer has only partial flexibility in linking statements or changing the direction of discussion. Writer can recall and produce all letters, with only occasional errors; production is partly automatic, with moderate speeds and few errors. Writer has quite good ability to transliterate unknown words.
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Translating

- 2 *Straightforward.* Translator is able to **comprehend**, and **translate accurately** and with adequate expression, material consisting largely of narration / description of events / processes / things, or straightforward reporting of statements / opinions. Subject-matter is mainly tangible / concrete, although some simple conceptual material may be present. Overall structure of material is clear, but some moderate complexity of reasoning is possible. Vocabulary covers most general functions and familiar / specialist topics; significant elements of a more informal / familiar style may be present. Some sentence structures may be longer or more complicated, but all are generally clear. Material normally uses standard printed form of script / characters, but may use clearly presented non-standard or hand-written form.
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Interpreting

- 2 *Straightforward.* Interpreter can comprehend, and interpret accurately and with adequate expression, material consisting largely of narration / description of events / processes / things, or straightforward reporting of statements / opinions. Subject-matter is mainly tangible / concrete, although some simple conceptual material may be present. Overall structure of material is clear, but some moderate complexity of reasoning is possible. Vocabulary covers most general functions and familiar / specialist topics; significant elements of a more informal / familiar style may be present. Some sentence structures may be longer or more complicated, but all are generally clear. Material is delivered slightly more slowly than normal, and may be in a slightly non-standard accent; segments do not exceed 35 words.
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4 Results

A foreign language like Persian is an exotic language in Australia and students can hardly find a native speaker in the language beside the instructors. Thus, the Internet is a very valuable asset and eventually is a virtual native speaker for the students.

The significant difference which the Internet makes in learning such a foreign language is evident with the results of four different courses (Table.1). In the courses in years 2002 and 2003, we did not introduce the Internet as a teaching tool. In these courses, the students reached the expected levels in weeks 14, 30 and 46, as outlined above.

On the other hand, since the start of year 2004, we actively included the Internet in our teaching curriculum. The two courses in year 2004 and 2005 showed a significant progress compared to the previous two courses. The students in 2004 reached the first level in week 12 instead of week 14, the second level in week 24 rather than week 30. For the final level, they were in the level as early as week 36, while other students usually reach this final training outcome at the end of the course which is week 46. For the 2005 course, the students made even a better progress towards speaking proficiently because of active introduction of chat sites. They also reached the first level in week 12, second level in week 24 and the third level as early as week 35. The significant difference in language use between these two groups was in higher general knowledge about culture and culture related language components, and frequent use of slang and colloquial speech for the second group.

Table. 1: Comparative achievement of the students in different courses

Courses not using Internet (2002-2003)								
Skill	Level	Week achieved	Level	Week achieved	Level	Week achieved	Level	Week achieved
Speaking	1+	14	2	30			2+	46
Listening	1+	14	2	30			2+	46
Reading	1	14	1+	30			2	46
Writing	1	14	1+	30			2	46
Translating			1	30			2	46
Interpreting			1	30			2	46
Courses using Internet (2004-2005)								
Skill	Level	Week achieved	Level	Week achieved	Level	Week achieved	Level	Week achieved
Speaking	1+	12	2	24	2+	36	3	46
Listening	1+	12	2	24	2+	36	3	46
Reading	1	12	1+	24	2	36	2+	46
Writing	1	12	1+	24	2	36	2+	46
Translating			1	24	2	36	2+	46
Interpreting			1	24	2	36	2+	46

4.5 Students' feedback

The students' comments and feed back showed that this approach was helpful and motivating for them. The following is a summary of students' comments:

- Having an easy and fast access to the native speakers
- Chat rooms are good for practicing the language. However, finding friendly chat sites is difficult.
- People on chat sites give us time to speak as they understand we are learning the language.
- Learning about the country and culture on the Internet is vital. Instead of finding different books on different cultural subjects, we need just to search for each specific topic on the net.
- There are sites which come in both Persian and English version, and they are very good for reading comprehension as well as vocabulary practice.
- The Internet put faces to all the strange names that we learn in the class and made things more interesting and easier to understand.
- Keeping up with native speakers on the screen (chat sites) was a good challenge, especially as they use so many abbreviations and slang.
- Talking to the real people in the language (native speakers) on the net is exciting.
- The topics on chat sites are always about real life issues and current affairs of the country. For example, during election, every chat was about it and I learned a lot of words and phrases about politics.

3.6 Obstacles and precautions

There are some obstacles and limitations for using internet in educational settings which should be taken into account while planing the course. The following are examples of these limitations:

- **Suitability for different age groups**

Using the Internet in courses which are designed for adult and mature students is easy. However, for the courses which are for younger students like in high school or earlier, it should be noted that the Internet can be harmful for their language learning, if it becomes a hobby rather than educational tool. Especially with young students, close supervision of the teacher in using the Internet, especially using chat sites, can reduce the risks

- **Legal implications**

Considering that chat sites can potentially be harmful for the students especially if they are in younger age, and especially if they use chat rooms to talk to unknown people, it is better to seek legal advice in the language institute you teach before including the Internet in the course.

- **Equipment and space restrictions**

The lack of space and computers for individual students and also accessibility to the Internet is another limitation which may prevent teacher in using this tool. Where there are a limited number of computers, it is advisable to divide the students into groups and ask them to use the Internet in groups.

5 Conclusion

- The Internet can be used as a virtual class for teaching language courses.
- There are different items on the Internet which can be used to enhance students learning of the target language.
- These are: on line radio and TV, online language courses, chat rooms, newspapers and periodicals and culture sites.
- Culture and culture related components are better and deeply learned via the Internet.
- For teaching linguistic and non-linguistic cultural components, the Internet is a unique and valuable tool.
- There are some limitations and precautions which should be considered before using the Internet as an education aid.

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