



ICT in the Literature-based English Language Classroom

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, both teachers and researchers in the field of language learning seem to have firmly established the positive role of literature as a source of authentic material, motivating factor and a significant contribution to raising students' cultural awareness for the English Language Classroom (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000; Hall, 2005; Carter & Stockwell, 2008). It has also been stressed that the positive effect of this approach is necessarily connected with sensible and methodologically correct application "of relevant and appealing material [...] through the use of activities that promote involvement, reader response and a solid integration between language and literature" (Banu 2012).

Heralding the transformation of the "linearity of the traditional text" (Barthes, 1977; Derrida, 1978) into an open interactive system that supports visual and auditory stimuli and "non-linear models of learning" (Robberecht, 2007), the ever-increasing role of ICT in language learning introduces the need for new pedagogical approaches to literary texts that accentuate active, individualised and motivating ways of interaction with and navigation through literary texts, and dramatically change its role in the English Language Classroom. ICT thus offers alternative methodological approaches to the role literature in ELT, in particular to language teachers who in many cases still feel "that they are not equipped methodologically to use literary texts" (Paran, 1998). In this way, ICT helps teachers to overcome some of the typical problems connected with the integration of literature into the ELT class, such as weak comprehension, lack of interest and confidence" (Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy, Jusoff, 2009).

In an attempt to establish an easily accessible methodology that would allow the participants of language teacher training programme at the Masaryk Institute of Advanced Studies in Prague to effectively combine the skills acquired in their ICT and English literature methodology courses, the paper critically assesses the rationale behind using ICT in the literature-based language class and examines the possible interaction of these effective, but not self-evidently compatible and unproblematic pedagogical tools. In doing so, the research explores recent methodological approaches that bring together literature and ICT tools (such as mobile phones, tablets, videos, presentations, hypertext, blog or electronic fiction), and points out both theoretical and practical problems that arise from their use in the English Language Classroom.

1. Introduction

The paper addresses theoretical and practical questions connected with the use of ICT in EFL/ESL literature-based English language classrooms, focussing on younger students aged 10 to 15. Rejecting the general statement that all students are simply attracted and motivated by literary texts, and claiming that literature-based language learning cannot remain unaffected substantial changes enforced by the ever-increasing use of ICT in language learning, the discussion assesses the rationale behind using various ICT tools to make original and often demanding literary texts easily accessible to both students and teachers. The paper is concluded with a discussion of a short case study summarising the practical use of ICT in a lit-based language class.

2. Theoretical Background

Over the past few decades, literature has been established as beneficial for EFL/ESL language class [21, 15, 8, 17], and seen as a tool that could "easily conform to the student-centred and interactive tenets of Communicative Language Teaching" [27]. Vural in his study summarizes three main reasons for using literature as: linguistic, methodological, and motivational [28]. Accordingly, literature can be seen as a source of original and authentic materials/ideas [18, 25], which enrich the class both thematically and linguistically [5]. These materials are seen as motivating and stimulating for both students and teachers [27, 28], helping "in grasping the language with ease and effortlessly" [29]. Additionally, the development of personal involvement [30] as well as Cultural/Intercultural awareness and globalization, emotional intelligence and critical thinking/literacy [17] are often mentioned.



As a part of the debate, it has also been correctly pointed out that the positive effect of the lit-based approach relies on sensible and methodologically correct application “of relevant and appealing material”, and “the use of activities that promote involvement, reader response and a solid integration between language and literature” [2]. This point reflects objections raised by some of the critics who claim “that the use of literature is not always necessarily pleasurable or meaningful for all readers and that classroom uses of literature put off at least as many students as they encourage” [14], and is particularly plausible given the common “overuse of what is called the traditional canon” [27], and lack of pedagogical competences that would enable teachers to assess, evaluate, understand, let alone choose and use suitable literary texts [20, 11, 28].

Interestingly, although many researchers describe literary texts as interesting and motivating *per se* [6, 7, 28], a number of recent works seem to accentuate certain decline of interest in traditional literary forms [30, 9], often on account of technological forms of entertainment and/or activities. These concerns seem especially plausible in light of the changes in teaching methodologies that rely on the use of ICT to enhance motivation and focus of the students [22].

3. ICT in the Lit-based Class?

Given these changes, the time seems ripe to refocus the attention of teachers and researchers on re-evaluating of our well-established approaches to literature in EFL/ESL classes, and think of ways that can make it more appealing to as many students as possible, including the technology-oriented ones. Contrary to general feelings and assumptions of some researchers [9], there is no reason to suppose that participants of lit-based language classes should be less responsive or less interested in ICT. Despite its spreading popularity in natural sciences and education in general [23, 9], the benefit of ICT for a literature-based EFL/ESL classes, in particular for students of upper primary and secondary schools, has not been convincingly addressed.

Yet, methodologically relevant in-class use of ICT promises to become a tool which would help teachers without extensive literary-theoretical training to minimize the main problems connected with the use literature, i.e., the potential lack of interest/motivation of the ever increasing number of especially younger pupils, who often think that the use of ICT is more interesting than reading books [30], and (actual/subjectively felt) methodological incompetence/insecurity of the teacher [13].

Relevantly to this discussion, a number of studies have already identified ICT as a useful tool which offers interesting and innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching literature at the university levels [9, 3]. These studies often focus on the role of hypertext, accentuating active, individualised and motivating ways of interaction with and navigation through literary texts [3, 9, 24], in particular considering experimental literary texts such as Yeats’ *A Vision*, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* or Eliot’s *Wasteland*. Transforming the “linearity of the traditional text” [4, 12] into an open interactive system that supports visual and auditory stimuli, ICT certainly offers more possibilities of approaching the literary text. These theoretical conceptualisations, however, should be applied in the environment of the upper- primary and secondary schools language class with utmost caution. First of all, literary texts that are suitable for “hypertextualisation” are usually too difficult for upper-primary and/or high school classes. Second, numerous studies have proven that the lack of traditional linear structure, so typical of hypertext, actually discourages majority of readers by making these texts more demanding and therefore in many cases discouraging [1, 19]. The same situation can be observed in the field of interactive ICT reading applications for children which make the text visually stimulating, dynamic, and interactive, yet do not compromise its readability by changing the “traditionally mono-sequential” form [16].

Baring in mind these potential problems, the application of “text-deconstruction” strategies in the EFL/ESL environment should primarily rely on augmentation of the post-reading/follow-up activities with ICT based techniques that connect to the reading activity but, unlike the text itself, offer auditory, visual, and “technological” stimuli. With the motivation of young students relying on variation of activities, tasks and materials [10], meaningful use of videos, pictures, and listening activities represents an ideal added value that makes the literary text more interesting by “deconstructing” it, i.e., by downsizing its role the class, making it open to discussion and re-interpretation through other media. Besides using ICT tools such as tablets, cameras, blogs or email to execute some of the traditional post-reading techniques such as role-plays, interviews, discussions or dramatisations [26], ICT might play an important role in confronting students with different “interpretations” of the text, such as film adaptations, music or visual arts.

4. Case Study

An example of a pedagogical approach, in which relatively simple ICT tools can overcome the difficulties with the in-class use of literature, while enhancing its effect, is a classical and notoriously



difficult item of children's literature – Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Famous for its bizarre characters and idiosyncratic language, the book overflows with remarkable scenes that may easily result in confusion, misunderstanding and loss of interest. To achieve the full effect, various ICT devices are literary necessary to make the story work in class. The pre-reading activities in a class of 10-11 year olds are based on in- class discussion and brainstorming of what the kids already know about the story. After this, a PowerPoint/Prezi presentation of illustrations from the book is used to introduce the characters of the book. The reading of the story as such relies on home reading and in-class discussions of selected passages/scenes, augmented by watching of videos that capture the selected scene. These activities stress juxtaposition of literary and visual representations of characters that the children might find attractive, such as the Cheshire Cat or the Blue Caterpillar. Web-resources such as YouTube are of particular help and teachers should not find it to difficult to find suitable scene online. The scene should be augmented by gap-fill exercises using prepared audio-script. Comparison of the audio-script as well as the general visualisation of the scene provides enough material for further discussion and post-reading activities.

5. Summary

The ICT-augmented reading thus enhances motivation, provides variability that suits shorter attention span of younger pupils by changing the text from a self-contained linear object that "is to be read" into a platform that hosts numerous audio-visual stimuli and becomes open to continual reinterpretation and discussion. In comparison to other approaches, the ICT-augmented learning does not stress only one aspect of the in-class activities (i.e. intensive work with the text as such). Combining approaches based on Reader-Response, Critical literacy and Language-based analysis [27], it allows students to combine information acquired from both textual and non-textual sources.

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