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Transliteracy as an Essential Skill in an English-Language Classroom

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Abstract

The use of ICT in language teaching and learning has long won universal acclaim of both learners and teachers. The positive impact of this use has been described by numerous authors. Problems, related to ICT in the educational context, however, are often ignored or considered negligible in comparison with advantages.

While A1-B1 students seldom have to work with longer oral or written texts (articles, presentations, lectures), ICT seem to have a rather positive influence on the learning outcome and the classroom atmosphere. However, with the increase in the volume of information processed by learners and its level, previously unnoticed problems emerge.

These problems are mostly related to the capability of human brain to process information. The article describes the fundings of the classroom observation and experiment prompted by the research by a Russian psychologist Kolesnikova (2013). Kolesnikova suggests that the skills of processing printed information (e.g. from a textbook) differ from those requires to process information presented in electronic media, which means the learner has to acquire transliteracy skills.

The classroom observation conducted by the author involved the experiment in two groups of C1 students. The experiment identifies problems related to using ICT in the classroom. Among these problems, a short memory span and evidence of functional illiteracy are the most alarming. Students experience similar problems with the subjects where the instruction is provided in L1; in the subjects in L2 (English) and L3 (French or German) these problems double and triple.

The author, however, does not deny the positive influence of ICT in language learning. The article discusses ways to cope with the problems and teach students transliteracy skills to make their studies more effective.

Keywords: Transliteracy, functional illiteracy, electronic media, perception of information

Transliteracy is broadly defined as an ability to write, read and communicate on a variety of platforms with handwritten, printed and electronic means. It requires not only combining information sources, but also thinking critically, assessing the quality of information, selecting specific information and using it for a particular task.

Learners are required to "switch over" from one semiotic system to another and decode or cross-code various types of information. Nowadays, learners often need to read and write using new ways and methods (a PC, a smartphone etc). Researchers [1;3] have come to the conclusion that traditional reading and reading online are two different activities and, therefore, require different approaches to teaching and learning. As a result, the terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" are now understood in a new way. The ability to read a printed text and write on paper does not automatically mean that a person is able to receive and process information, or is capable of effective communication.

ELT publishers have always been among pioneers of producing e-learning materials. These materials, alongside with audio and video recordings, include mobile and PC applications. It seems, therefore, that learners are able to select means and materials that suit their individual needs best and have an opportunity to develop transliteracy skills by being exposed to the same material (a vocabulary lesson, a grammar task etc.) in a variety of ways. Therefore, the material is likely to be perceived, processed and learnt effectively. The scientifically backed design of materials supported by research in neurolinguistics adds to the ability of human brain to process information, hence recommendations on fonts, sizes, colours, visuals, technical features (frequency of the screen, design of navigation bars etc.). As a result, learners can enjoy a range of products, which are easily customized.

However, this is where problems may start. Usually they are ignored or neglected in comparison with advantages of using electronic resources or ICT in the classroom.

Problems can be roughly divided into two groups. The first one is related to the technical aspect. For instance, Russian-speaking younger learners face difficulties with Latin keyboards. It often causes

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stress in A1-B2 learners, as was noticed by our students during on-the-job training in local schools. Other problems may include difficult navigation, unusual designs etc. However, technical problems are easily overcome provided learners have sufficient practice.

The second group of problems stems from the peculiarities of perceiving information by human brain. Technical features (colours, fonts, brightness of the screen) cannot be customized indefinitely. Soon it becomes clear that some students perceive information better than others. However, when the volume of the perceived information remains relatively small, this difficulty is less manifested. Most A1-B1 students do well provided the information fits one page (or one screen) and there is little interactive information embedded in this page. In other words, a short text with interactive vocabulary items accompanied by comprehension questions presents no difficulty in perception; a similar text with hyperlinks plus interactive pronunciation tips dilutes attention.

The problem becomes worse when students have to work with longer texts and more complicated types of information (longer fiction or academic texts, lectures or presentations), which normally does not happen until they reach B2-C1 level. The difficulties manifested themselves in our classroom when students (Kostroma State University, specialization: teachers of Foreign Languages) started complaining of being unable to grasp the meaning of the information presented in the e-pub format (textbooks), whereas students who used traditional printed versions did not report such problems. The difficulties first emerged, paradoxically, in L1 (Russian) when students were reading materials on the subject taught in Russian (Teaching Methods). An exceptionally short attention span (they could not recall the information they have just read) and inability to summarize the meaning of the paragraph in their own words were major difficulties.

Eventually, almost the whole group started using printed materials and highlighting the most important pieces with markers, although highlighting is available in e-books.

Observations in the class where the instruction was entirely in English demonstrated that the situation with perceiving information was more complicated. To identify the problem more precisely, we divided the class into two groups (the division was done on a voluntary basis). G1 was asked to work with mostly printed materials and resort to e-materials when there was no choice; G2 was instructed to do vice versa. The subject chosen was Language of Mass Media, because it offered a variety of texts and types of information: long articles and reviews, even longer opinion columns, short news items, video and audio materials etc. G1 students were asked to print out the materials, G2 students were supposed to read them from their gadgets and watch accompanying videos, if available. In addition, they were encouraged to write comments and take part in polls, if available, and use hyperlinks to read additional information.

Immediately, we noticed the following pattern: short texts, mostly news items, where the information was limited to enumerating facts or sequences of events, were perceived similarly by both groups, despite specific vocabulary (political and economic). Longer texts (0.5 - 3.0 pages long) were perceived differently. Students in G1 had no difficulty in navigating across the text, in finding necessary information quickly, in locating new words and, most importantly, in understanding the meaning (the factual side, the opinions presented in the text). They also managed to summarize the chosen texts without any serious omissions. We observed an interesting pattern of work in G1: students put several pages on the desks to see the whole text or a significant part of the text. Students from G2 admitted that all the aforementioned aspects caused difficulties. They reported missing the whole text. Scrolling up and down or turning electronic pages did not enable them to see at least two pages simultaneously. Those who used PCs and laptops could see several pages, but the font size was too small to make reading effective. The most serious consequence of such reading (even after doing such additional activities as watching videos and answering poll questions) was the students' inability to see the logic. According to one student: "I understand every word, every piece, but the puzzle is still not assembled". Other students also reported receiving fragmentary information.

Larger academic texts and fiction the students were reading for other subjects in L2 (English) and L3 (French or German) were perceived in the same way. Many students who were using multimedia sources admitted that after doing the task, especially homework, in the required form they used the printed materials to catch up with G1 students. As we became alarmed that the overall academic performance may deteriorate, we asked students to choose the mode of reading and doing homework in accordance with their own preferences and soon found that almost all students (18 out of 21) started using traditional ways of reading.

Although there is not enough evidence to describe the problems arising from using multimedia sources as functional illiteracy (on diagnosing functional illiteracy see [1]), we can safely say that in our case some students were unable to function properly and develop themselves (see the UNESCO definition of functional illiteracy [2]). Our short experiment just briefly outlined the existing difficulty and

highlighted the paradox of the situation: the more means are used to reach learners, the more dispersed their attention becomes and the more difficult they find it to concentrate.
Numerous works on using electronic media in the classroom have two extremely serious limitations: (1) they are suitable mostly for A1-B1 students (2) they concentrate on the design aspect of the task rather than on the actual language output. Taking into account everything said above, teachers have to ask several important questions: how should they teach the skill of obtaining, perceiving and processing information if not through traditional techniques? Do the aforementioned problems indeed lead to functional illiteracy or are they just a symptom of a temporary condition that will disappear some time later (and how much time later)?
Our experience shows that the period of time can stretch indefinitely if nothing is done to improve the situation, and the knowledge/skills students receive can be fragmented and unsystematic. However, the simplest solution - to use printed materials and ignore ICT - is least suitable for several reasons: (1) outside the academic context, students will still need transliteracy skills; (2) it is unwise to ignore the opportunities provided by ICT.
Therefore, teaching transliteracy (new literacy) skills is becoming essential and should be done as early as possible to avoid problems similar to those described above. Another important conclusion is that such skills should be taught, i.e. teachers must not hope that these skills will simply appear just because the younger generation is born with a tablet in their hands. Whereas many learning resources demonstrate the variety of learning platforms, it is much more important to show how they can be integrated and merged.
The key technique of teaching transliteracy skills is gradual exposure to combinations of platforms (no more than two at a time). Among our students a QR-quest, integrating texts and a Web-search, is a successful example. The same news topic as a video footage accompanied by a short text, a summary of a lecture in the Prezi format are just a couple of examples. The focus, however, should be placed not on the technical aspect, but on the language output. If it is not so, student can develop many skills that are either not related to language learning at all, or related extremely indirectly. The situation when students have all the necessary technical skills, but no ideas of what to say is even more dangerous that the one described above.

References

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