

DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH LITERATURE: THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE OF BULGARIAN STUDENTS

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Keywords: motivation, foreign language learning, digital learning environment, English through literature.

The present article will focus on motivation in foreign language learning, digital technologies and creating an effective digital learning environment for supporting the process of learning and reaching desired outcomes. Besides that the author will make an attempt to summarize personal experience of integrating digital tools and resources in teaching English as a foreign language through English through Literature Approach. A detailed description of the strategies for instruction and the learning modalities used in the 21st century classroom with 11th grade students from Bulgaria is presented.

for citations:

Genova M.M. (2019), *Designing an effective digital learning environment for teaching English through literature: the learning experience of Bulgarian students*, Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society, v.15, n.2, 120-132. ISSN: 1826-6223, e-ISSN:1971-8829
DOI: 10.20368/1971-8829/1592

1 Introduction

During the last few decades, technology has had a profound impact on every walk of life. Processes like globalization, digitalization, etc. have brought to issuing new educational policies for enhancing literacy, as well as implementing new approaches in education.

What teaching and learning strategies will assist a given student population in the 21st century to develop further competences and acquire new ones, including new language skills? Taking into consideration the Digital Agenda for Europe (2014), which is one of the seven flagship initiatives of the European Commission for sustainable growth, this can be achieved by using the full potential of ICT. On the other hand, according to the National Strategy for effective implementation of ICT in Education and Science (2014 – 2020), the goals can be accomplished through fostering foreign language learning, team work, creating and sharing good pedagogical practices with ICT tools.

Motivation is of paramount importance for achieving positive results and success in learning, especially in difficult subject areas like languages. This is one of the most complex tasks foreign language teachers nowadays face in order to reach the goals set in curriculum. In the Bulgarian context, motivating students to read extensively literary texts written a couple of centuries ago for native speakers is doomed to failure. On one hand, demotivation results from language difficulties, despite the fact that most students have self-assessed themselves as independent users, i.e. B2 or B2+ under the CEFR - levels considered a starting point for using Language through Literature Approach. On the other hand, a boring plot or topics irrelevant to the life of 21st century teenagers, lead to unwillingness or flat refusal to read at all. The article offers possible teaching strategies to integrate digital tools and resources with the aim to raise students' motivation to participate in class and develop basic skills for interpreting literary texts.

2 Motivation

2.1 What is motivation?

The two words often used to define 'motivation' in dictionaries, and closest to our understanding of the term, are enthusiasm or willingness to perform tasks. The problem of motivating students is not a recent one – towards the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, scholars became interested in students' motives for losing interest in studying in general. 'Motivation may be construed as a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal or

goals' (Williams & Burden, 1997, p.120).

Psychologists investigated the connection between motivation and foreign language learning (Gardner *et al.*, 1997). They tried to explain the processes that motivate language learners (Silver & Bufanio, 1996); they suggested techniques (Burden, 1995) or designed models for motivation in foreign languages. For example, in the model offered by Dörnyei (1994), the components are presented on the Language Level, the Learner Level, and the Learning Situation Level. The last one is comprised of motivational components specific for the course, the teacher and the group of learners. Another model in L2 is that of Williams and Burden (1997) who give a detailed list of motivational components: intrinsic factor (perceived value of activity, sense of agency, mastery, etc.) and extrinsic factor (nature of interaction, learning environment, etc.). Dörnyei (1996) shortlisted ten strategies, known as the Ten Commandments for Motivating Language Learners: setting a personal example with your own behaviour, creating a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom, presenting the tasks properly, developing a good relationship with the learners, increasing the learner's linguistic self-confidence, making the language classes interesting, promoting learner autonomy, personalising the learning process, increasing the learners' goal-orientedness, familiarise learners with the target language culture.

To expect a positive shift in reading habits and the ability to interpret literary texts, it is important to encourage reading. This can be done in a couple of steps. Experts suggest that the initial motivation, i.e. the stage preceding reading itself, consists of: first, discussing the need to read authentic texts in L2; second, giving the students the opportunity to choose the source, because this makes them more independent and responsible personalities (Dörnyei, 2001). Since the Bulgarian syllabus is designed around representatives of various literary trends in British and American literature, it is not possible to follow the second step. Thus, motivating students to read becomes a real challenge for the teachers who are obliged to develop students' language skills by using a variety of literary texts (fiction, poetry, drama) and English through Literature Approach. The latter is not only used for supplementing the subject matter – it is an instrument for engaging student's attention and improving their skills in a better learning environment, i.e. there's an element of entertainment, essential for arousing their interest and motivation.

3 Digital technologies

Since the early 2010s, new technologies have been called 'digital - a term used to describe the possibility to 'transmit signals faster and more accurately than analog signals' (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2006). Nowadays it has become a buzz word not only for manufacturers of various electronic devices and IT

specialists, but for policy makers, researchers and educators. It's not surprising that many specialists have tried to define digital technologies. From the number of definitions two have actually caught our attention because of the long list of devices enumerated and the functions they can play in education. The former refers to a definition given by TESOL, i.e. "the use of systems that rely on computer chips, digital applications, and networks in all of their forms" (TESOL 2008, p.3) and whose functions are to store and process data: for example, electronic tools (computers and laptops), electronic devices (DVD players, interactive whiteboards), mobile devices (cell phones, iPhones, tablets), social media, multimedia, applications, cloud computing. The later comes from Education Brief 5, in which digital processing systems "encourage active learning, knowledge construction, inquiry, and exploration on the part of the learners, and which allow for remote communication as well as data sharing to take place between teachers and/or learners in different physical classroom locations" (Cambridge Education Brief 5, 2015).

3.1 What is digital learning?

A number of terms have been coined to define learning with new technologies. The most commonly used ones during the first decade of the new millennium are e-learning, computer-assisted leaning, Web-based-learning, virtual learning. In an e-learning environment the bulk of the content is delivered via Internet, satellite broadcast, audio-video tape, interactive TV and CD-ROM (Kaplan-Leierson, 2006). With the appearance of digital technologies, the term that has become popular is digital leaning. Digital leaning environments are comprised of sets of technology-based methods which can be implemented for supporting the learning processes and instruction (Wheeler, 2012). No matter what term is used to describe the integration of technologies, it is a totally new environment where both teachers and students use them to interact with each other; the former use ICT to support instruction and enhance learning, while the latter use electronic applications and digital devices to learn, collaborate and create.

3.2 Digital technologies in the 21st century classroom

The primary goal of introducing new technologies on the market was to facilitate business in general. However, both, educational policy makers in OECD, UNESCO, European Commission, etc. and educators have quickly recognized the potential of digital technologies for 'education, for promoting research and implementing effective teaching practices (*EU Digital Agenda 2020*) and begun to invest in infrastructure and training. At conferences and

formal meetings, experts from various institutes, centres or private organizations have started drafting programmes or making recommendations how to integrate digital technologies in education. To acknowledge the important role of digital technologies, as well as their effectiveness in teaching and learning, other experts have tried to rethink some of the concepts and approaches in pedagogy (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2008).

It's not possible to enumerate all the attempts to share personal experience with digital tools and resources. However, we can illustrate the enormous importance of digitalization in education with a few examples of useful models. To help language teachers, learners and educators to use technologies in various teaching and learning settings (face to face, online or a mixture of the two) the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) and TESOL have designed Technology Standards. Next come three extremely popular models in recent years - the Substitution, Augmentation, Modification and Redefinition (SAMR), the Replacement, Amplification and Transformation (RAT) and Substitution Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) models designed to assist teachers in integrating and assessing the use of digital technologies. Another model worth mentioning is that of Gaffney who has attempted to summarise the benefits and drawbacks of digital technologies. Out of the eight principles of the author, the following ones are related to the present article: relevance of the digital curriculum resources, appropriateness of the technological tools to deliver them, capability of teachers to use them, motivation and interest of students to learn with them. (2010, p.1 and p.21).

4 Teaching English through literature in Bulgarian context

Teaching a language through Literature is one of the many approaches used nowadays in foreign languages. The author will not discuss its advantages since that is irrelevant to the article. It is the approach around which the Bulgarian curricula for XI and XII grades of schools with intensive classes in English are built; students are acquainted with prominent representatives of British and American literature (Shakespeare, Byron, Coleridge, J. Austen, Dickens, O. Wilde, W. Irving, Hawthorne, M. Twain, Fitzgerald, D. Mitchell, R. Barnes, T. Morison) and their most popular works. Using language as a source of information about the target culture, the curriculum aims at developing students' reading, critical thinking and productive skills (speaking and writing) on a higher level so that students become fluent users of English. This is not an easy task not only for students but also for teachers. To reach the desired outcomes, teachers must come to grips with the understanding that they should alter the learning process and their methods of instruction. They can support learning by using strategies to increase students' engagement. In practice that can be done

by making use of innovative technological tools and resources and involving students in tasks which require other than language skills.

Which factors will lead to enhancing students' motivation to read and interpret authentic literary texts? According to the results from an end-of-year questionnaire about appropriate teaching and learning strategies and student motivation, completed by a group of 33 students, integrating new technologies and creative tasks can have a positive effect on student performance in class. Considering these, as well as the syllabus and its goals, the level of language fluency of the students and the concept of the 21st century classroom, on one hand, and Dörnye's and Williams-Burden's frameworks, on the other, the author decided to balance between an ordinary face-to-face modality and a flipped classroom, designing tasks towards accomplishing the final goal through specific strategies of instruction – using digital tools/resources and students' digital competences.

5 Practical suggestions for effective digital learning environment

There are no strict directions how to implement new technologies in the classroom on institutional level (Ministry of Education or Regional Inspectorate), nor are there guidebooks to follow. Bulgarian teachers have the absolute freedom to decide alone whether to use or not technology, what digital tools and resources to use, how and where to integrate them.

The continuous updating of the latest technologies and digital educational tools poses a serious challenge to teachers: they can't play the role of digital immigrants any more; they should be prepared to work in an absolutely new environment where digital technologies are not a necessity but a reality; they need to possess a number of digital competences. To meet the requirements of the new Z or Alpha generations, teachers should be able to use the same digital tools. The list is enormous and it is impossible to include every single tool for the mere reason that they become outdated quickly. The digital tools and resources described in this article comprise only a small part of the existing ones.

From the hundreds of digital tools on the *Directory of Learning & Performance Tools*, published on the official pages of the Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies, the author has used: digital devices (PC, IWB, Tablet, iPhone, Android phones), emails, Google apps (Google Disc, Google Forms, etc.), blog (Seesaw), video channels (Vimeo, YouTube), platforms (My Mixes, Storybird), flipped classroom. The list of digital resources consists of presentations, tutorials and short instructional videos, animation, trailers, digital media.

5.1 Why digital media

The main digital tool in my classroom is digital media with free access to different online resources, which actually turns them into Open Educational Resources. Since the syllabus is structured around selected classical works from the British and American literary canon, the choice of digital resources is defined by two factors: first, each literary work is used for the creation of a script, which consequently is filmed or animated, i.e. is meant for a specific audience in terms of age; second, each literary work has had a couple of film adaptations, i.e. the plot has been interpreted according to the scriptwriter's and director's understandings.

The potential of digital media, the power of film as a 'visual story', the availability of a few film adaptations of the literary work on the syllabus are a prerequisite for a more effective work with authentic texts. This is not a simple compare-contrast technique of two channels of information (an authentic literary piece on paper and a film based on it), rather interpretation of some basic techniques in cinematography for conveying meaning through images and sound, for arousing emotional or psychological reactions in the audience such as camera distances (long shot, medium, close-up, etc.), camera angles and movements, mise en scene (lighting, colour, facial expressions, body language, costume), sound and music. Although film directors and producers shoot a scene with the intention to show the action, capture mood and build atmosphere, the visual story in every film adaptation is different: the events are shown in a distinctive way, the accentuation is different and their effect on the viewers is entirely different too.

Being acquainted with the basic instruments of film analysis, students are able to interpret the director's view – why he used a specific technique, what effect he wanted a scene to have on the audience. The short extracts from the film adaptations that the author used have the following advantages from a technical point of view: free access on You Tube Channel; easy integration in the curriculum; possibility to be watched again at any time, from anywhere; their length is defined by the teacher. From a pedagogical point of view the extracts are an ideal instrument in the classroom because the combination of picture, sound and tasks related to the text give each student opportunity to participate in activities directed to comparative analysis (comparing and contrasting plot, setting, characters, shots, angles, mise en scene, dialogue, etc.)

Despite these cons of using digital media, the lack of Internet connection or the poor quality of the older film adaptations can disrupt work.

6 The learning experience of Bulgarian students

6.1 *Strategies and stages*

All the activities and strategies for foreign language instruction through English through Literature Approach are in conformity with those described in academic literature. The activities are student-centred and the teacher is in the role of an assistant and moderator. New strategies are used during the different stages of the learning process. For example, instead of the traditional face-to-face modality in the form of a lecture and complex metalanguage for literary analysis (Collie & Slater, 1987), the author uses short video tutorials in a flipped classroom, discussions on presentations given by the teacher/ the students or on digital video related to a literary work. All kinds of questions are asked and discussed – questions referring to facts, opinions, criticism (Sage, 1987), because the main goal is fostering communicative skills in the target language.

The work usually falls into three stages: pre-reading, interactive activities with text and round-up activities. What is meant here by text is not only extracts from works of literature, but digital video, animation, trailers, interview, musical pieces, etc., i.e. items which provide information related to a given writer and his work. The three stages comprise a cycle usually spread over six to eight classes depending on the syllabus and the number of digital tools/resources used. Each cycle starts with a video tutorial presented by the teacher, and continues with integrating digital resources (film adaptations, animation, etc.) and ends with a creative task. In other words, during the three stages the students go from low order to high order thinking skills, i.e. go from remembering, understanding and applying through analyzing and evaluating to reach the highest level of creating (Digital taxonomy of Churches, 2008).

To achieve the best results and highest efficiency, experts advise to plan carefully the first stage and use the maximum number of activities: to introduce the topic and new vocabulary; to put questions related to the author, the period; make assumptions of the plot, setting, characters, themes, etc., all of which provoke students' curiosity and motivate creative writing. The aim is to prepare students for the next stage – interactive work with the text (Pulverness, 2003).

6.2 *Pre-reading stage*

During this first stage the author uses the 'flipped classroom', a type of blending learning, during which the learners watch a short video tutorial asynchronously either at home or another place different from school. They use any electronic device (computer, laptop, tablet, iPhone, Smartphone, etc.) or application. The instructional video can be accessed on a video channel or via links posted on the students blog. The asynchronous method of instruction

allows students to watch the tutorial more than ones depending on their needs.

The tutorial presents a given literary period, the historical background, literary trends, outstanding representatives, etc. in a succinct way (5 - 10 minutes), summarizing the most important information on a specific topics accompanied by a set of questions for discussion in class.

Alternative pair or small group activities accessible via email or link on the class blog are: a. step-by-step tasks linked to the writer, main themes, etc. shared on Adobe Spark Page accompanied with a set of questions for discussion in class; b. Project Work on making an interactive presentation of a particular author/literary work on the syllabus - students are given guidelines (time, number of slides, etc.), criteria for assessment, plus instructions how to organize their presentation.

6.3 While-reading stage

The second stage is related to specific tasks to develop students' speaking skills, especially discussions, debating.

Film adaptations: film adaptations, animation, trailers, etc. digital resources can be accessed freely on YouTube. They are meant to be watched in class; the length of the video extracts depends on the excerpts of literary works included in the course book, as well as the duration of the class.

The tasks are structured around extracts from the film adaptations and fall under the compare-contrast type of analysis. After watching the extract and taking notes, the students participate in a discussion and share personal opinion. Eventually, they read the extract in the course book and look for similarities and differences with the extracts watched.

Building vocabulary activities: the tasks are aimed at enriching students' vocabulary on topics from the literary works on the syllabus.

6.4 Post-reading stage

The students practice the language by being involved in activities to develop productive skills, namely writing skills; they are placed in the writer's shoes and modify, expand or add more to the text; students create interactive presentation, a clip or a short video. The final stage is usually in the form of homework assignment – individual, pair work or small group. Depending on the topics discussed, students are assigned different creative tasks aiming at:

- developing writing skills: rewriting the story from another perspective, switching between genres, for example, keeping a diary, writing letters, poems, short one-act plays.
- interpreting part of the literary work by means of a short video clip or

interactive presentation; the students are given a frame to follow (topic, length, setting, characters). However, they have the freedom to show their imagination by using personal experience and knowledge about the world.

- getting acquainted with peer work and giving peer formative assessment of the final product; students are obliged to publish their assignment on the blog, and then comment on and assess what has already been published.

After sharing the assignments on the students' blog (*Seesaw*) or *Storybird* platform, all students receive feedback from the teacher or classmates; each student is obliged to comment on their classmates' work and assess it informally.

Conclusion

The above described strategies in the foreign language classroom come from personal experience with 33 seventeen/eighteen-year-old Bulgarian students of English who were demotivated to learn in the traditional way. Completing a couple of cycles, most participants provided a positive feedback on the used teaching strategies. Over 75 % of them were fully engaged in various creative tasks with new technologies, which is an indirect indicator of the effectiveness of the suggested practices. The first trial of the listed strategies wasn't accompanied with any tools for measuring their impact on the students. However, the author is in the process of implementing the same set of strategies on a larger group of students for a longer period of time, as well as attempting to collect data from that experiment through qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools.

By suggesting that rationale, the author has made an attempt to engage the students in enjoyable activities in a much friendlier digital learning environment. Apart from that, various digital tools and resources have been integrated with the aim to support learning and foster fluency in the target language. What really matters is not so much the strategies used themselves, as the idea that these strategies lead to meeting specific goals. 'Technologies should not be considered as a way to change the medium of instruction in the classroom; rather, it is the teachers who should know how to use technologies innovatively' (Caron, 2008, p. 287)

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