

Digital Competence Through Authentic, Self-Made Texts

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Abstract

In an attempt to promote foreign language acquisition educators at all levels are looking for new ways to integrate virtual worlds into the curricula. Digital economy finds its way to the tech-savvy youth. Governments and educational decision makers are funding “digital platform” projects in an attempt to better equip the next generation for a changed world. Still, on the most part is it not efficient enough. The paper intends to introduce “good practices” in language acquisition where trainers and trainees of foreign languages in teacher training institutes together with children produce digital texts with focus on teaching the ‘Four C-s’ with special emphasis on pupils’ creativity and the pride of sharing the results of their collaboration on digital platforms. Although the goal of “preparing students for a global society” may seem far fetched there is no reason why innovative projects like PALM cannot take a key role towards its realization.

Keywords:

Digital skills, digital literacies
PALM project, The WebQuest
4C-s

1 Catching up with changes

It is a commonplace to say that life today is more complicated than as it was 50 years ago. There has been a rapid technological boom never experienced before, triggering frustration in those who cannot keep pace with the new internet governed world. Education platform should be able to adapt to changes evoked by information technology similar to those of other segments of economy. New type of skills and new competencies are required from prospective employees who are still at school (from elementary to high school) and who are going to expect more connectivity and creativity from their teachers to meet global labour market requirements.

Children’s digital footprints are now taking shape from very young age. Parents and grandparents upload videos of children, write blogs, or post photos (sometimes even ultrasound scans) about babies who may not even be born. A study commissioned by AVG finds that 92% of children have an online presence by the time they are two compared to 73% of children in the EU. 7% of babies and toddlers have an email address created for them by their parents and 5% have a social network profile (Magid, 2010). Research by the NPD Group shows that 82 percent of children ages 2 to 5 play games on video-game consoles. 4% of the children aged 3-5 (and this data is true for Europe) can tie their shoes and 54% use a tablet fairly well (The Soapbox Lord, 2010). In Hungary today the internet penetration in households is about 74%, and the mobile penetration is also relatively high 118% (KSH, 2015).

Speak Up 2008 report concluded that today’s secondary school students see their educational futures built almost entirely around technology. It also suggests that the elementary school kids are restless with the traditional forms of learning and schools are eager to incorporate into their educations the electronic tools that have become omnipresent in children’s everyday lives: their smartphones, laptop, computers, iPods, or MP3 players (Daly, 2008, p. 7). The vision of a 21st century learner (back in 2008) has become reality. And certainly computers will be even more central to the educations of younger students now rising through elementary and high schools. Classrooms are becoming digital with students using the computer to play mathematics-learning

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games and reading interactive e-textbooks. Educators might criticize but cannot afford to dismiss the overflow of computers and social media into students' daily lives.

2 Old/new literacies

The skills students need to acquire today need to be indicated clearly. Fifty years ago literacy and numeracy made up education's core skills. They were commonly known as 'the three Rs' (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic). It is widely acknowledged that these basic skills are not enough to succeed in the 21st century, which connects education to the world with unique demands.

The four main skills—referred to as “the 4C-s”—which are otherwise a prerequisite in tomorrow's placement are: *Communication, Collaboration, Critical thinking, and Creativity*. Speaking about communication foreign language acquisition comes to the forefront of education strategies.

In addition to the fundamental 4C-s *digital literacy* is an indispensable skill that both students and teachers have to acquire. Any primary school teacher, even trainees know that digital literacy involves mastering many different skills, from analysing how texts are organized to understanding the writer's reasons for writing. Similarly, digital literacy should be understood as a range of separate sub-skills, or literacies. Literacy is more than just the ability to read and write. The number of literature on the 21st century learning frameworks on digital literacies is endless (Pegrum & Hockly, 2016).

However, language teachers do not need to worry about keeping up with technology as it keeps evolving and getting more complicated. Digital literacies are transferable skills which can be applied to many particular sites, programmes and apps. Howard Rheingold (2010) points out that instructors should not keep up with the latest technologies but to “*keep up with the literacies that the technology makes possible*” (p. 14). The issue here is not a lack of essential reading skills, or foreign language skills, but new digital skills or “digital literacies” vital for the 21st century learner. These skills include—as well as knowing the right search terms to find exactly what they need on Google—managing information overload and being able to discern critically whether learning tools are effective or not. Without these skills both learners and teachers might get very frustrated, despite their best intentions.

In Volume 65 of the *ELT Journal*, Nicky Hockly (2011) groups digital literacies under four main categories – language based, information based, connection and (re-)design based. According to her definition language-based literacies include the ability to read and write new text types such as blogs, text messages, forum discussions and hyperlinked texts. It also includes the language needed for the 21st-century learner to participate effectively in multimedia environments such as video gaming and mobile apps. Information-based literacies cover “search literacy” – knowing the right search terms to find information digitally, and, once we have found that information, knowing how to decide how reliable it is.

Hockly defines filtering literacy, which is about knowing how to manage the above mentioned “information overload” – the problem of being faced with too much information. The skill of socializing in the digital age she names *connection* literacy, that is about managing one's online identity and relationships, while network literacy helps to select the relevant information from social media “feeds” and other online networks. To be able to select and piece together important information and cast off irrelevant ones learners have to be provided with (re-)design-based literacies, defined as “the ability to recreate and re-purpose already-made digital content in innovative ways”. This recognizes that a lot of what we produce online is “reformulation” of what others produce: copying and pasting, quoting from wikis, retweeting tweets, manipulating images and sharing others' posts. The author calls attention to important issues such as copyright, which is by no means the springboard to creativity. After all, in the 21st-century English as a foreign language competency skill falls into the category of “digital literacy”. Consequently, EFL teachers need to adapt to this new reality. Incidentally, media teaching skills are still not a mandatory part of all teacher training colleges.

Following that line of argument the critical “4 C-s” will also gain new meanings. Communication skills development goes beyond cultural, regional, physical boundaries. Collaboration in forms of group work, game playing team work, or pair work of discussion has always been proclaimed useful in classroom. By focusing on the appropriate models and performing real life activities teachers promote labour market skills. In terms of critical thinking self-reflection is emphasized: learners are expected to evaluate their own progress critically as they are supposed to do more work individually. They should be made responsible for their own educational and intellectual development.

Out of the four C-s mentioned above priority should be given to *creativity*. Creativity is more than a skill: it is a trait associated with motivation, independent learning, willingness and desire to learn, to explore, to move on

to new directions. With ample support from an open minded, digitally literate educator and with the use of the appropriate online tool students can design their own learning material which they can share with each-other.

3 Searching for the “right stuff”

Several teaching resources with practical advice are available for educators who want to turn the use of the internet to their own advantage and want to educate “digitally literate” students. Teachers of foreign languages are adopting to this new reality by trying to select the most relevant topics and materials to suit their students’ needs. Publishing houses, global educational organizations and businesses provide the interested learners and teachers with plentiful, easily accessible education materials to choose from. Years ago the problem for learners was lack of availability: How do I practice English when I’m not in class? But finding resources is no longer an issue. You can pick and choose from a huge range of websites, podcasts, distance courses, telephone classes, adaptive learning apps, video lessons, video-conferenced conversation exchanges and mobile learning platforms, to name just a few.

Too much choice can make the first step towards change a frustrating nightmare. It’s also much easier to get distracted and waste time. Have you ever looked for something online and, confronted with hundreds of options, given up? On the flip side, learners and teachers may simply be unaware of what is on offer. With the increase of computer and fast Internet access in schools on the rise, many teachers, with little or no training or experience in using this medium as a language learning tool, have surely asked themselves this question once or twice when faced with the prospect of getting out of the comfortable (for teacher) textbook, and onto the Internet with their classes. Educators are increasingly finding that students want to design their own curricula and find ways to learn in their own style. They want to take an active role in choosing and creating materials for educational and entertainment purposes, and innovative educators are more than happy to meet this demand.

3.1 WebQuests

A good example for facilitating learners’ creativity is a *webquest*, <http://webquest.org/>. The *WebQuest* is a popular Internet-based option for finding, creating, sharing, and researching projects which is both learner-centered and teacher-active. The webquest model - that uses authentic language - potentially involves learners in practice of all skills and systems in English, while at the same time promotes learners’ independence and collaboration. Participants will complete the work by means of navigating the web, while involved in a variety of skill enhancing activities. To paraphrase Philip Benz (2001), a WebQuest is a constructivist approach to learning, where with the proper guidance and ‘scaffolding’ students can accomplish far more actual learning than in traditional transmission-of-knowledge situations.

The ultimate goal of such a project is language acquisition. Additionally, learners can exercise a substantially high degree of independence, (as well as interdependence as they collaborate with their classmates), which in turn promotes development of learner autonomy and creativity (Benz 2001). With the elaboration of class - related topics participants “*will have the opportunity to employ and develop critical ‘higher-level’ thinking skills, as they not only meet and grapple with large amounts of authentic, real-world language, but are also motivated to reach an understanding of it in order to transform this given information into something new, something of their own, and something that can be reacted to by others*” (Marzano, 2016, p. 35).

The upshot of this is that not only are learners motivated to use and develop skills such as analysing, synthesizing and evaluating, collating and organizing information, and interpreting language for meaning, to name but a few, but are also involved in practising collaborative oral skills as they negotiate their way through the various tasks with their classmates (Brabbs, 2002).

3.2 PALM for learners and educators

PALM project (Promoting authentic language acquisition in multilingual context) <https://www.palm-edu.eu> is another exemplary resource for dedicated and open-minded language teachers, the supporters of community based learning in multi- or plurilingual societies. The project platform offers learning, teaching and training materials, tutorials, in eight languages.

The originality of the project lies in its reversed allocation of tasks. Instead of teachers it is the pupils themselves who produce written and spoken texts, while the process of initial text production is guided by the

class teachers and teacher trainees. Although there are plenty of excellent materials available for classroom work, the age difference between the authors of the texts and the end users (that is the pupils) defines the topic with its style, vocabulary, viewpoint, etc. and as such it might question the “authenticity” from the point of view of the reader/learner.

Experienced and highly skilled writers can be up to three generations older than the target group of learners, thus the whole presentation of topic does not always follow the quickly changing trends of the young. In PALM it is the pupils who are given a lot of freedom to collaborate with peers and share their experiences with other children from all over the world with the help of the ubiquitous internet and multimedia tools. Age adequate input and output promote highly personalized language acquisition – thus making learning an enjoyable social experience. Preparing digital materials for peer-learning is not about education or foreign language acquisition exclusively, since the central aim for all stakeholders (from schools to partner schools to parents) is the active fulfilment and creative participation in the learning process.

4 Perspectives

Information-communication technology has revolutionized education, modified teachers’ roles and instruction methods. Teachers of English on the one hand are in an exceptionally good position due to the plentiful internet resources in English they can use for their classes. On the other hand educators have to tailor the “Google material” to 21st-century learners’ skills and literacies, including digital literacy, which is quite a challenge to some of the senior staff. The good news is that incorporating digital literacy goals into English lessons should not put greater pressure on either the teacher or the students. Many of the students are surfing the net and using their new apps in class rather than their coursebooks. A teacher, therefore, may become less an oracle and more an organizer and guide, someone who adds perspective and context, finds the best articles and research, and sweeps away misconceptions and bad information. Luckily, there are plenty of excellent resources like the WebQuest or the PALM that enhance learner’s autonomy, and fit in with learners’ needs and interests, and with ample guidance from teachers learners are involved in reflecting on their peers’ work as much as are engaged in self-evaluation. Can anybody ask for more?

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