

The Application of Digital Technologies in Reading and Interpreting Literature: The Example of “To Kill a Mockingbird”

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Abstract

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee is an outstanding work of American Literature, which is an attractive novel with a high potential to attract students' interest. The purpose of the study is to find out most effective activities to be applied to a literature class, especially the application of technologies like the web components to facilitate the trend. The novel is actually selected as an example which could be analyzed in terms of various narration techniques including characterization, theme, plot and symbols. In this context, whether the activities including drawing a triangular comparison diagram, Venn diagram, clustering, brainstorming, games, watching documentaries and

videos, technology integrated games and things as such have positive effects on the students' comprehending the literary devices included in the novel to examine the extent to which these technologies could be successfully developed to teach the novel. The participants in this study were B.A students of English literature at Lamerd Branch, Islamic Azad University in 2010-11 academic years. The results of the study indicated that the success and the comprehension or appreciation of the students' literary devices included in the novel could be developed by means of these selected classroom activities and the use of the information technologies.

Keywords: *Teaching Literature, literary terms, narration techniques, ICT, VLE and CMC.*

I. Introduction

Literature teaching is a significant and fundamental task in language teaching programs. One of the reasons for including literature in language teaching syllabus is because of the educational, linguistic nature characteristics of it as it contributes both to the student as an individual and to his or her command on language[1]. The other reason is that literature offers a bountiful and

extremely varied body of written material which is important in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues, which is enduring than ephemeral [2]. A literary text is an authentic text and it offers a context in which exploration and discussion of its content lead on naturally to examination of language [3]. Depending on the fact that literary texts provide language sources for being used in a virtual learning environment it is feasible for student

readers to have active interactional roles in working with and making sense of the language and literature while dealing with such texts as both their literary and reading comprehension texts in their classes. In this context, the value of teaching literature in classes can increase students' creative aspects of language [4]. Another important point of literary text is the cultural enrichment they provide [5]. Different cultures will value different things and that for students from different cultures, attention needs to be given to the selection of material which on the one hand is representative of different traditions, discourse type, writers, etc. [2]. Thus, the overall reasons for integrating literature into language teaching are, as Duff and Malley (1990) state: "linguistic, methodological and motivational"[6].

In that sense, reading literary texts is a crucial issue that necessitates imaginative and productive participation of the readers. Also, background or prior knowledge of any reader determines the reader's ability to understand, interpret and make decisions on meaning of literary texts. To shed light on the readers' understanding of the text, attention must be paid to the Reader Oriented theories according to which, "reader+text= meaning"[7]. To further develop the idea attention must be directed towards Roland Barthes "Codes"(119). As reported in Selden, Barthes believes: "The codes represent systems of meaning which the reader activates in response to the text"[8]. Moreover according to Barthes, one's use of these codes result in a 'structuration', an activation of the

text's signifiers. Although this reading process is in response to the text, different factors as the readers; economic, social, educational, cultural, age and many other factors as such are of key significance in the readers' discovery of the hidden layers of meaning in the text. In an experiment discussed in Bressler, four students were given chapter 31 of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) to read and report their understandings. After the reading process, the author concludes that different interpretations, all of which were right, are the result(s) of the "autonomy"(p.75) of the text. The author decides that such interpretations arise from the interpretative processes based on personal experiences. As Bressler puts it:

For Rosenblat a text is not an autotelic artifact [or...] the one and only correct interpretation of any text. Instead there are millions of potential individual readers of the potential individual texts. Readers brings their individual personalities, their memories of past events, their present concerns, their particular physical condition and all of their personhood to the reading of the text.(p. 78)

Thus in addition to the above ideas in this context attention must be paid to Eagleton with the same ideas put in different words:

Building an interpretation is the recreative process which is affected by many

aspects of literary and linguistic awareness, cultural and social knowledge, beliefs, attitudes to life, conceptions and assumptions which all play a valuable role in reading process [9].

In this context, teachers who represent supervisors in literature teaching process are also influential in students' experience through facilitative classroom activities arranged according to the students' needs, backgrounds and interests.

Teaching of literature in which the language study and literary study are more closely interrelated and harmonized is an effective approach in terms of education programs of many countries. As the language learners, teachers, administrators, and parents complain about why most of the students cannot attain the desired level of success in literature classes, what kind of activities should be more effective when applied in a literature classroom while analyzing the novel in terms of various narration techniques including characterization, theme, plot, exposition, point of view, motifs and symbols is investigated in this study. With this aim, a curriculum project was developed so as to teach Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* through designing a concept map, curriculum project plan, lesson plans and samples of students' works, and the technology integrated including power point files, audio-visual programs and technologies as such. But some questions may arise at this point. Why and how such technologies could be applied to the teaching of literature. Is

the idea theoretically supported or no it is a matter of personal experience.

The rapid technological advancements in the last decades have heralded a new era in our understanding of promoting literacy and presented some of the advantages of using information communication technology (ICT) and VLE in the classroom in the present era of information explosion in which many aspects of our lives have undergone dramatic changes. "Once there was famine of information, but today we are drowned in the deluge of information". Huge changes have occurred in the pedagogy of teaching English language and literature. In fact ICT, CMC and VLE have initiated new possibilities into the classrooms. The bridge between education and internet technology has made a deep impact on perspectives about teaching and learning. In other words, as a result of the application of ICT, CMC and VLE not only "the relationships between teachers and students have undergone a phenomenal change" [11], but also the role of the teachers, the nature and context of learning, as well as the function and relative importance of the contents of courses have all been challenged and redefined .

In a broad sense terms the "ICT and VLE have become mutually interchangeable with computer technology"[11], which are considered in this study? However as a broad concept, it is necessary to point out that this paper would include a discussion of the advantages of different domains of computer technology or in other words CMC systems as e-books, e-sources, and hypertext, i.e. the web 2.0 components in teaching English literature. This

paper attempts to discuss the extent to which ICT and VLE can contribute to the teaching this novel as an example of English literature, although technology or multimedia is not a teaching method or theory by itself, rather tools that aid educators by improving access to different types of media already in practice.

Technology is used to simulate real-life situations and as O' Leary states: "helps learners to have control over the learning process"[12] Therefore, there must be complementary relationship between source language research and computer assisted language learning (CALL) practice to create a successful literature learning (Carol, 1998, p.24). Moreover it is claimed that "using computers for free voluntary surfing will encourage students to wander through the internet and read what interests them" [13].

According to what has been stated by Hoven, computers enable learners to "pool their knowledge in effective ways and enhance peer correction and language repair work" [14]. Computers enable learners to work at their own pace. This research paper aims at sharing practical experiments with ICT and VLE in teaching English Literature in the light of the earlier discussed theories, though they are related to language learning in general, the tools would be used to teach literature instead. It would mainly deal with the pragmatic aspects of using CMC, ICT and VLE with the students of English Literature.

According to Mukherjee:

Scientific and technological inventions and innovations in the field of communication influence the production/reproduction of literature[...] The digital mode and medium offers certain facilities of communication, dissemination and preservation which other modes and medium cannot[15].

In line with the above quotation one can introduce many resources through which the teaching of literature is facilitated. In addition to that the use of technology in reading a novel for example is privileged over the traditional reading methods due to the difference in the nature of online texts. The most important difference between an online and a physical text is the manner in which they are read. Whereas a physical text, such as a novel, short story or fairy tale, is read chronologically – from start to finish – an online text is "non-sequential", or "non-linear". Very often an online text will contain links – what is called hypertext - to other pieces of writing, be they a link to the author's e-mail address, an online dictionary defining a word used in the text, or to other articles related to the subject, and these websites will again have links to other relevant sites.

The World Wide Web is tied together by these "hyperlinks" which connect related, individual websites and documents to each other. Therefore, reading an online article with "numerous hyperlinks will be open-ended, as the reader himself/ herself will be the one choosing which related

link he/ she wants to click on"[16]. which facilitates reading and comprehension, What are the good practices? We can easily guess that ICT activities only have value if they allow students to develop key skills. A plot overview or a character description on websites such as www.sparknotes.com or www.wikipedia.org give students the easy way out when they are faced with a literary topic so they do not seem to help that much. There are, however, resources which can prove highly interesting and motivating for students. Thus the outline of the activities and the narration techniques included in the analysis of the novel in terms of the curriculum project and the available and potentially practical digital resources for the analysis of each aspect of the novel are indicated in the following:

1. Setting: Setting is the time and place in which a story happens. Setting can be taught to the students in many ways, but in this study the setting was taught in the following way. At first power point presentation with pictures of the place and symbols indicating time as well as the audio/video clips were shown to the students. Then students were asked to discuss the importance of what they saw. In other words, the physical background of the story, the time and place in which the action occurs were analyzed by the students in pair work and group work activities. Also, the students were expected to comprehend the geographical location, era/time, date (time of year), nature, the period of history in which the characters are placed. For instance, the students were supposed to

express their ideas and make comments via comparing their own hometown to *Maycomb* (the fictional town in the novel) by stating the similarities between them.

2. Theme: As themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work, the teacher focuses on what message the students could take away from this story and the students should remember that "theme" is a statement, not a word. Students were expected to deal with the themes "the coexistence of good and evil, the importance of moral education, the existence of social inequality, understanding, prejudice, and courage" through the novel "To Kill a Mockingbird". The students were required watch a power point presentation, taken from the internet, which included the theme of "courage" shown in pictures which compared tiny cartoon characters famous for their courage like "The Brave By" and write a paragraph about whom they know and consider being courageous via giving justifications why they think so in order to comprehend the theme of courage and reflect their ideas creatively.

Moreover, the teacher had them participate in the discussion activities which focused on the quotations that indicated the theme of "understanding" and the students had a chance to express their ideas in an effective way via "spend a day in my shoes activity". Also, the students gained better understanding of the theme "prejudice" via brainstorming and making connections in terms of race, gender, handicaps, rich/poor, religion and discussing and answering the questions "Jim Crow Laws-Legal Segregation" and "U.S. Constitutional Amendments" found

from the internet by themselves in class in order to compare and make connections between the prejudice we have in today's world and the characters had in 1930's...)

3. Characterization: Characterization is the way an author presents characters directly or indirectly in a narrative. Characters are divided to many kinds based on different categories. As an example they can be protagonist or antagonist according to their positive or negative functions, moreover based on change they are dynamic in case they undergo change and static if they remain the same. There are other kinds as flat or round according to the amount we know about them. A round one in a character from whom many aspects are known by the readers, while a flat one is the one of whom only one or two traits are known. Usually students confuse when they are asked about these names, so it is necessary to make use of tangible materials in making them remember these abstract caegiries. To make the characterization understandable a mixture of different pictures, sound clips and video clips were presented through a power point presentation. After that some parts of the movie adapted from the novel, downloaded from www.youtube.com, were shown to them with some traits explained. They were asked to analyze the characters via brainstorming about the four dimensions of characters, describing their features and names based on what they had seen, watched or heard. The results indicated that the students understood how to delineate the novel characters

through a combination of broad dimensions of character analysis.

For instance, in order to examine the physical features of the characters, the answers to the questions as What does the character look like? How does he/she dress? How does he/she wear his/her hair? What do these choices reveal about this character? were investigated. For social dimension, the students answered questions such as How does this character interact with others? Is he/she introverted or extroverted? Does he/she take charge or submit to others, were sought. At last, for the psychological dimension the students answered the questions including how does this character deal with problems/conflicts? Does he/she face them head on or escapes from them? Does he/she seek help or tries to do it alone? Accept that is there a problem or live in denial?

After analyzing the characters in a variety of situations that reveal them through these dimensions, the students could begin to construct a composite sketch of who this character was.

4. Symbols: Symbols are defined as objects, people or animals standing for other things. As Symbols indicated the objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts, the students were expected to comprehend and find them in the novel via filling the charts and guessing activities. For instance one of the key metaphors of the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was analyzed via discussing the quotation that necessitated the students dealing with the implicit meaning and answering open ending questions.

The study of all these items were to enable students discover the themes hidden in the novel, to help students learn more about themes such as prejudice, courage, understanding, education, religion, setting place and time were clarified with the comprehension and discussion questions. In order to comprehend the main ideas and details in the novel in terms of all of the literary devices, the students were expected to understand the character development in literary texts and relationships among concepts and details in informational texts in terms of main idea and details.

Also, the students watched the documentary about Scottsboro boys' trial and discussed the main points in the trial scene. Moreover, the students were expected to construct background information about the scenes and events taken place to make connections with the fictional events taken place in the novel "To Kill A Mockingbird" in the lesson. Furthermore, the students watched the trial scene of Tom Robinson and answered the quiz questions while watching the movie. This research as one of the first experiences of the author in teaching literature through the application of technology indicated that the activities have a positive impact upon peoples' comprehending literary devices and applying narration techniques and elements of the novel via analyzing the novel.

Conclusion

As earlier discussed it must be said that in addition to being a useful tool for learning, interpersonal

communication and information gathering, the computer offers an indispensable array of programs which promote the development of learners' abilities in Iran, as the subject of this paper, to improve both their English proficiency and English literature.

As it was discussed, one of the best ways to encourage curiosity among students regarding a certain literary topic is to introduce them to what methodologists call a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). VLEs can be those websites which are designed like spider webs, very well organized and once you enter such an environment you cannot leave it without having learnt something. Examples of such VLEs are the Victorian Web and the Romantic Circles, which provide thousands of links and references to an enormous quantity of resources, from the e-texts of almost any literary production of the period to detailed descriptions of the social, political, historical and economic context, with cross-references to major literary works. VLEs do not actually save effort on the part of the student but extend possibilities of going beyond the traditional classroom setting.

Thus as observed the results of the present research conducted on the study of To Kill A Mockingbird through the application of technologies, can be concluded that the activities including the use of websites, ICT, CMC, VLE and educational software as well as watching documentary and videos, proved beneficial and effective in improving students' comprehension of the literary devices included in the novel. The findings of the research study are consistent with the prior literature pointing out that using appropriate classroom activities

facilitate students' analyzing the novel effectively in a restricted time and improve their proficiency levels in literature learning programs.

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