21st CENTURY LANGUAGE CLASSROOM WITH DIGITAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES

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Abstract: This paper discusses the importance of implementing alternative teaching and learning methods of instruction in the 21st century FL classroom. The focus is on integrating specific digital tools and resources in teaching English by ‘English through Literature Approach’. The aim is to foster students’ skills to interpret texts from British and American literary canon not only through traditional medium of instruction, but also technology-rich instruction regardless of time, place and electronic devices. An attempt will be made to summarise and evaluate the teaching methods, taking into account an online survey conducted with twelfth-grade students after a two-year experiment.

Keywords: FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, DIGITAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES, TEACHING METHODS, ENGLISH THROUGH LITERATURE APPROACH, LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the need for implementing alternative teaching and learning methods of instruction in EFL with the help of specific digital tools and resources. The aim is to improve students’ understanding of authentic literary texts and foster their interpretation skills. According to the national curriculum the basic approach in teaching EFL used in 11th and 12th grades with intensive classes in Bulgaria is ‘English through Literature Approach’. Teachers are obliged to develop the students’ skills using literary texts from various genres belonging to the British and American literary canon. Teachers are faced with the dilemma which methods to use to motivate students who find those literary texts old-fashioned, boring and often difficult from a linguistic point of view. The wisest decision is to make use of such methods of instruction, and such an environment that both students and teachers feel comfortable with. What better way than incorporating digital technologies in a meaningful way. This paper uses a definition of method, recognized by many experts in pedagogy, namely ‘a set of procedures, i.e. a system that spells out rather precisely how to teach a second or foreign language’ (Celce-Murcia, 2001: 5) [1]. In other words this is the way/ways teacher and students choose to reach goals on the syllabus.

Digital technologies are considered one of the most important pedagogical tools that can facilitate the teaching and learning instruction in the 21st century classroom. The findings from numerous studies on the subject have shown their effectiveness on education at large, as well as positive attitude towards teaching and learning a language (Pennington, 1996 [2], Warschauer, 1996 [3], Zhao & Frank, 2003 [4]), better final results (Brandl, 2002 [5]; Harrison et al., 2002 [6]), improvement in motivation and performance, self-satisfaction (Sturm & Rankin-Erickson, 2002 [7]), etc. Of course it is unrealistic to think that technology alone can perform miracles in education. It ‘should not be seen as the way to change the teaching environment in a class; instead, teachers should know how to use the technology in innovative ways’ (Caron, 2008: 287) [8]. World-wide authorities like Fullan supported this view advocating the integration of technology, pedagogy and change knowledge – ‘we need to make it all about learning (the pedagogy part), let technology permeate (the technology part), and engage the whole system (the change part)’ (Fullan, 2013:74) [9].

The continuous appearance of newer technologies and digital educational tools are making teaching more and more challenging today: teachers cannot be in the shoes of ‘digital immigrants’ any more – they need to be prepared to work in a totally new environment where digital technologies are not a ‘must’ but a reality, i.e. they need to be digitally literate. To answer the requirements of Generation Z or Afla students, a teacher needs to be able to use almost the same digital tools students are familiar with, plus operate with new ones to motivate them. The list with existing digital tools is enormous and it’s absolutely impossible to enumerate every single one, since the moment it is compiled, new digital technologies will have been produced. That’s why the digital tools and resources described in this paper comprise only a small portion of the ones that could be used successfully in teaching foreign languages.

Different educational institutions not only recognize the pros of integrating digital technologies in education, but also urge all educators to implement them in the classrooms as they (technologies) improve teaching and learning instruction, practicing the target language and assessing language learners (ACTFL, 2013: 1) [10].

The focus of this paper is on the usefulness of certain digital tools and resources in teaching EFL inside and outside the 21st century classroom through authentic literary texts at any time and from anywhere. The paper presents the results from a survey designed with online research tools, which was conducted with a group of twelfth grade students of EFL after a two-year experiment.

2. Digital technologies, tools and resources

One of the most popular topics for discussion in pedagogic literature, conferences and various official documents today is the integration of new technologies with education. Before answering the questions ‘How, What, When’ to apply in teaching and learning, we should clarify the meaning of digital technology and some terms deriving from it. While at the beginning of 21st century experts defined concepts like e-learning, electronic sources of information and computer skills, today they have discussed new ones: digital technologies, digital media, digital tools and resources and digital skills. These concepts are interpreted in different ways. For Cantoni and Tardini digital technologies are ICT (2008: 26) [11]; for TESOL they are systems using computer chips, digital applications and networking in any existing form (TESOL 2008, 3) [12], i.e. electronic tools (laptops/computers) and devices (DVD players, IWB, etc.), mobile devices (cellular phones, MP3 players, iPhones, tablets, etc.). Another interpretation came from Cambridge International Examinations according to whom digital technologies are processing systems that ‘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 International Examinations. Education Brief 5: 2015) [13].

One of the best summaries of efficient digital tools, compiled annually after surveying ITC specialists and high school and university educators world-wide and frequent users, is presented by the Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies (C4LPT). These are streamed into four categories: instructional (management/learning systems), content development (pdf, presentation, clip, art and photo, graphics, audio and podcasting, video and animation, social, personal and professional tools, blogging, Web page tools, etc.), social (emailing, discussion...
forums, webinar platforms) and personal and professional tools (personal learning management systems, digital portfolios, research, and notetaking tools, browsers and extensions, players and readers).

And since we are living in the era of digital technologies, popular teaching support tools in the 21st century classroom are digital learning resources. For the purposes of this paper, from the number of definitions on the subject, we will use the one given by professor Rory McGreal (2007) [14], according to whom a digital learning resource in a broad meaning is any resource that can be: a. stored in digital format (electronic texts from books, journals, magazines, conference papers, reports; simulations, websites, graphic images, Quicktime movies, etc.), and b. adopted further for teaching and learning purposes.

3. Teaching and learning models with new technologies

With the common efforts of specialists in the field of technologies and pedagogy new models have sprung up, which in turn educational policy makers in the face of UNESCO, OECD and the European Commission have started promoting. These ‘innovative approaches to technology-supported learning’ to enhance education (OECD, 2016: 88) [15] can be summarized as follows:

To assist teachers and learners in the process of integrating digital technologies, as well as assessing their effectiveness in the classroom, models like Replacement, Amplification and Transformation (RAT), Substitution, Augmentation, Modification and Redefinition (SAMIR) and the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) were designed in the first decade of the 21st century.

Another example is the Hewlett Packard Catalyst Initiative Project (2013) [16] that came up with five teaching models applicable to STEM subjects, namely 1) educational gaming, 2) online laboratories, 3) technology-enabled collaboration, 4) real-time formative assessment and 5) technological support for skills-based curricula.

Apart from these is e-learning, referring to various online courses (MOOCs) available for both professionals and learners, numerous open educational resources (OERs) and the implementation of different teaching modalities (technology-rich instruction, blended learning, informal or full-time online learning).

For a positive outcome in different subject matter areas, the focus should be on specific methods of instruction. Although extremely useful in STEM subjects, the HP models are hardly applicable in teaching languages and literature, which are classified as soft subjects. While for the latter section to describe the level of importance a fixed 7-choice response scale (Not at all important, Low importance, Slightly important, Important, Very important, Extremely important) was used Likert’s scale. For sections E and F we used Likert’s scale from low-order to high-order thinking skills (LOTS – HOTs) according to Churches’ Digital taxonomy: from understanding and analyzing the information learnt, through analysis, personal evaluation and creating (Churches, 2008) [23].

After finishing each of the stages of the selected literary works, the students were asked to complete an online survey on the most popular teaching methods and digital tools used in the classroom. The objective was to elicit information on their usefulness and estimate their effectiveness for the literary development of the students.

The work with literary texts follows three main stages in teaching: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. These stages have in common that they start with a video tutorial in a flipped classroom; then continue with specific in-class student-centred activities in which the teacher is monitoring or facilitating the learning process; the round-up is a creative task on the topic discussed. In fact this is a teaching and learning situation which passes from low-order to high-order thinking skills (LOTS – HOTs) according to Churches’ Digital taxonomy: from understanding and analyzing the information learnt, through analysis, personal evaluation and creating (Churches, 2008) [23].

Table 1: Participants, sources, modality, methods, digital tools and resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students by gender %</td>
<td>55 Male: 55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills proficiency</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(CEFR) level</td>
<td>C1/C2: 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources &amp; materials</td>
<td>Literature (OER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modality</td>
<td>Collaborative, blended classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Lectures, presentations, reports, debate, group and class discussions, reading and writing assignments, construction of vocabulary lists, online research, multimedia presentations, role plays, group work projects, use of digital technologies, film adaptations /animations and OERs on YouTube or Vimeo channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital tools</td>
<td>Visual digital tools: PDA, digital video, trailers, animation, PowerPoint presentations, Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital resources</td>
<td>OERs, tutorials, extracts from film adaptations, trailers, research papers, cartoons</td>
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</tbody>
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As already mentioned, this paper aims at summarizing the results of integrating digital technologies in the language classroom and evaluating their usefulness. The information was collected from a two-year experimental project with 17/18-year-old students of EFL through ‘English through Literature Approach’ at Second English Language School “Thomas Jefferson”, Sofia. By incorporating a number of digital tools and resources and using different methods and modalities, mainly technology-rich instruction (including flipped classroom) regardless of time, place and electronic devices, we aim at developing students’ skills to interpret authentic literary texts. The material selected for the purposes of the study comes from one of the available course books for 11th and 12th grades of language school which, according to the requirements of the syllabus, is designed around British and American Literature (See Table 1). From the list of texts on the two syllabi we have selected six texts: the selection is not arbitrary – they have been chosen: a. to represent different genres (plays and novels), and b. on the basis of existing film adaptations/animations and OERs on YouTube or Vimeo channels.

Table 1: Participants, sources, modality, methods, digital tools and resources

The work with literary texts follows three main stages in teaching: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. These include a cycle of lessons each varying between 6 and 8 classes depending on the subject matter and the number of used digital tools and resources. There is difference in the number of classes during the three stages for each literary text. What the cycles have in common is that they start with a video tutorial in a flipped classroom; then continue with specific in-class student-centred activities in which the teacher is monitoring or facilitating the learning process; the round-up is a creative task on the topic discussed. In fact this is a teaching and learning situation which passes from low-order to high-order thinking skills (LOTS – HOTs) according to Churches’ Digital taxonomy: from understanding and analyzing the information learnt, through analysis, personal evaluation and creating (Churches, 2008) [23].

After finishing each of the stages of the selected literary works, the students were asked to complete an online survey on the most popular teaching methods and digital tools used in the classroom. The objective was to elicit information on their usefulness and estimate their effectiveness for the literary development of the students. The survey consists of six parts: Part A: Personal information; Part B: Current language skills; Part C: Teaching methods; Part D: Tools; Part E: Level of literary development; Part F: Overall opinion of the course and its importance for the students’ literary development and complex literacy. For sections E and F we used Likert’s scale: for the former section a fixed 7-choice response scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree), while for the latter section to describe the level of importance of a fixed 7-choice response scale (Not at all important, Low importance, Slightly important, Neutral, Moderately important, Very important, Extremely important).
5. Results

An overall number of 96 students participated in the survey out of which 53.1 % boys and 46.9 % girls, respectively (Part A). In terms of the level of language proficiency the majority of students (ranging from 63 % to 51 %) labelled themselves as C1/2 users of the target language according to CEFR (Part B). Out of the suggested 45 different teaching methods used in class during the course in British and American literature (Part C), some of which are given in Table 1, the top ten that the students pointed out as preferable are as follows: class projects were most popular – 75 (78.1 %), followed by PowerPoint presentations by panel of students – 73 (76%), and those by teacher – 72 (75 %), textbook assignments – 69 (71.9%), use of digital video – 60 (62.5%), use of technology and instructional resources for presenting content - 55 (57.3%), use of trailers – 52 (54.2%), formative assessment by teacher (on completed assignments) – 51 (53.1%), written assignments to outline portions of the literary texts – 49 (51%), reading assignments in journals, supplementary books, etc.- 48 (50%). As least popular students mark crossword puzzles – 15 (15.6%) and student construction of diagrams, charts, or graphs – 23 (24%).

Figure 1: Useful tools in and out of the classroom

Part D of the survey refers to useful tools in and out of the classroom. As it can be seen from the bar chart on Fig. 1, out of the 45 tools presented, 32 are digital tools. Among these at the bottom of the scale is video conferencing, marked by only 5 students; twice as many believed in podcasts; a bit over 6 % of the students believed in RSS feeds; only around one tenth marked digital radio as useful. On the other end of the scale, with 72.9% come wikis, as useful. On the other end of the scale, with 72.9% come wikis, interestingly, the students that expressed uncertainly about the value of importance referring to their complex literacy. However, interestingly, the students that expressed uncertainly about the effectiveness of specific digital tools and resources incorporated and teaching methods applied during the course, was less than a fifth (See Fig. 2) and almost one tenth respectively (See Fig. 3).

The conclusion after summarizing the answers from Part E is that the bulk of students, between two-thirds or over (65% - 68%) and half of them, agree that they possess the required literary skill for each and every question. Between a quarter and a fifth (15%) strongly agree with the statements, whereas only a small percentage of students (sometimes 1 per cent strongly disagree, or between 3 to 8 per cent disagree) believe that they cannot handle tasks connected to literary texts.

Part F presents the students’ overall evaluation of the teaching methods and tools used in the foreign language classroom. The pie charts summarize the students’ attitude towards the course: Fig. 2 illustrates their literary development, while Fig. 3 illustrates their complex literacy. At first glance it is clear that a significant proportion of students (64 % and 63 % altogether) recognized the positive impact of the course for their personal development and growth. Being extremely valuable for their literary development accounted for 8.3 per cent of the students, and this figure was similar for their complex literacy. A quarter of the surveyed students estimated the course as very important for their literary development and more than a third of the students believed that it played a very important role in shaping their complex literacy. For two-fifths the course was moderately important in terms of literary development, with 10 per cent less students pointing out the same value of importance referring to their complex literacy. However, interestingly, the students that expressed uncertainly about the effectiveness of specific digital tools and resources incorporated and teaching methods applied during the course, was less than a fifth (See Fig. 2) and almost one tenth respectively (See Fig. 3).

Only a minority of learners, however, did not think that the course was of real importance. The percentage of those who considered the course of low importance in both categories is absolutely the same, namely 3.1 % of the students. The situation is very similar with the number of the ones for whom the course was not at all useful (1 %).

Overall, a significantly higher number of students showed their appreciation of the positive effect that the integration between digital technology and teaching ‘English through Literature Approach’ played for their literary development and complex literacy, whereas for a very low number of students the methods and digital tools used had almost no importance.

Figure 2: Level of importance for literary development
6. Conclusions

In this paper, for the purposes of the syllabus in question, we have used only a handful of the existing digital tools and resources available. As seen from the results of the survey, some of them have been more effective than others. Considered together, the teaching practices we have deployed in the FL classroom, have served their purpose extremely well since they have brought to improving the students’ literary development. This has been possible due to the fact that the four criteria for effective integration between new technologies and education, suggested by Fullan (2013) [9], have been met: the various teaching and learning methods of instruction have engaged both learners and teachers better; the switch from traditional face-to-face modality to a flipped classroom has been efficient and not difficult to experiment with; it has also been possible to access blogs, platforms, online resources, etc. from any electronic device or any place (school, home, etc.), and any time, which definitely make them ‘technologically ubiquitous’; last but not least, come the task-oriented activities with digital tools and resources derived from real-life situations that require creativity and various learning skills. All that proves again that it is ‘not so much a matter of choosing the right device, the right amount of time to spend with it, the best software or the right digital textbook. The key elements for success are the teachers […] who have the vision, and the ability, to make the connection between students, computers and learning’ (OECD, 2016: 85) [15]. And although research in the last few decades has proved the usefulness of digital technologies with different types of learners and their overall performance, it is vital to realize the fact that ‘technology alone will not enhance learning, but using it as part of good teaching practice can open new doors to learners and teachers’ (OECD, 2016: 73) [15].

7. References

(Cambridge Handbooks for LanDI mage Teachers series)