

Communication Technologies and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in Teaching Literature

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Abstract—Information communication technologies have changed on human life, especially educational systems and methods of instructions. They have changed teachers' methods, learning styles, and contents of the courses. This paper introduces some of the most useful of such technologies in teaching English literature. As a case study such technologies have been used in teaching different genres. The results indicated a great improvement in students' learning, moreover the feedback was positive as such technologies resulted in an easier and more tangible understanding from the students' side, moreover the teachers' feedback was positive as it eased their teaching process.

Index Terms—Globalization, CMC, English literature, VLE, electronic media, cyber space and ICT.

I. INTRODUCTION

Some people consider computers as a potential threat to education. But the fact is that in case of literature attention must be paid to the fact that such technologies are not only useful, but also motivating as the young generation is interested in using them. However technologies as communication technologies and internet have changed education from classical books to virtual ones in many forms as audio, video and such similar ones due to the necessity of our age and to be in line with the necessities of globalization, new trends in educational management must correspond too. In fact as the electronic media is an inevitable means of instruction in the global atmosphere today. As the world is developing fast, the educational procedures must conform and adapt in proportion too; The main idea this essay is concerned which is considering the potentials of ICT and VLE and suggesting the required conditions to facilitate the application of ICT and VLE in education.

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"[1]. In fact, as a result of the application of such technologies, not only "the relationships between teachers and students have undergone a phenomenal change"[2], 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 today's digitalised world, however, the terms ICT and VLE have become synonymous with 'computer

technology"[3] and it is that aspect which is to be considered in this study. However as a broad concept, it is necessary to point out that this essay 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 web2.0 components in teaching English literature in a non-native context. Though raising such issues may not seem new, as long as the context in which such technologies are used is a developing country, Iran, it could be considered as new, hence some important questions one would come across including: First, will the various genres of literature on the internet enrich learner's knowledge of literature? Second how influential the online resources would be in teaching English literature?

Technology is used to simulate real-life situations and as [4] states: "helps learners to have control over the learning process". Therefore, there must be complementary relationship between source language research and computer assisted language learning (CALL) practice to create a successful literature learning. Moreover it is claimed that "using computers for free voluntary surfing will encourage students to wander through the internet and read what interests them"[5]. In fact computer assisted language learning opens up vistas of expansion in the field through facilitating learners' engagement in active communication which in turn "facilitates the development of second language competence"[6]. In addition attention must be paid to the fact that "multimedia-assisted language learning and Internet-based instruction contribute to EFL students' cross cultural competence"[7].

According to what has been stated by [8] computers enable learners to "pool their knowledge in effective ways and enhance peer correction and language repair work". Computers enable learners to work at their own pace. This research paper aims at sharing practical ideas about the use of 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. It would be discussed how the extensive use of synchronous and real-time communications could be practiced in English literature classrooms as teaching tools.

II. DISCUSSION

The underlying assumption is that "ICT and VLE can be a valid and useful tool for the promotion of knowledge of literature"[9], and that the "disadvantages presented could be avoided with a qualified supervisor"[10]. Moreover to be

able to give practical solutions and contribute to building up the knowledge of the teachers new in the field and to further motivate those teachers still practicing the traditional literature teaching methods, the paper would deal with pertinent questions as: How far are such technologies applicable to the student community?

It is to be pointed out in "many teachers are perfectly well satisfied with their practices and are unlikely to question prevailing educational processes" [11]. In order for teachers to make changes to their professional practice a considerable effort is necessary to create the possibilities of restructuring knowledge in the face of experience. Considering the increasing difficulty teachers of literature encounter today, "following a decreasing interest in reading books"[12], the author points to the need to motivate students, which such resources can help accomplish.

Some teachers are motivated by a "desire to better understand the relationship between theory and application"[13]. To give a better understanding of how these can help students, especially in the case of non-native speakers of English it seems that foreign literature could never be taught effectively without ICT in countries with little exposure to the native environments.

Moreover such technologies can be used to solve a cultural problem by bridging the gaps too. "The Western collective consciousness is different from that of the Eastern" [14]. Their origin of literature is deeply rooted in Greek culture, myth and legends, Iranians with Quran or in some cases pre-Islamic culture. The Western critical insight became more argumentative and relied on logic, whereas Eastern ideas mostly resided on faith. In spite of "the globalization which was expected to result in singles"[15], one can see still see a wide gap between the western and eastern thinking. "Darwin, Freud, Marx, and the World Wars had changed the way the Western world was looking at things, to a greater extent these shattered the Western faith in their own belief system " [16], hence making it difficult to understand the western literary concepts by the eastern students as well. In such a case using PowerPoint slides, short films, internet and podcasts are inevitable as they help the teachers in reaching out to students and helping them to learn easily as they are different in nature from a physical text both in nature and in practice.

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"[17] , which facilitates reading and comprehension, yet at the same time due to their non-sequential nature they may interrupt a student's trend of thought. Thus a different method, an eclectic approach would be the most suitable as far as the experiences are concerned.

One of the best ways teachers must learn to encourage curiosity among students regarding a certain literary topic is

to introduce them to what methodologists call a Virtual Learning Environments, including those websites designed like spider webs, 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. Such an approach places the student at the centre of learning and activates what [18] calls 'kinaesthetic learning', an essential feature of ICT use in English, which enables the use of a much greater range of effects, the use of varying type fonts, wide use of color, the addition of sound and imported graphics, and kinetic effects for example. The potential of such effects has been shown to have a highly motivating effect on students, especially those who are more likely to think in terms of spatial rather than verbal models.

Coming to terms with the digital era can be a difficult task for English literature teachers, but it is a challenge that they have to face in order to keep up with the times and manage to provide motivation and necessary skills for their students. For methodologists, it is a question of dealing with e-texts, digital literature, digital publishing and cyber-textuality. Raine Koskimaa refers to "the emergence of a new type of literature, digital literature, which has to be addressed by methodologists as it is complementary to the traditional form of literature"[19].

In addition to the above problem, with regards to teaching literary genres as plays or novels, one of the most important aspects to be considered when selecting teaching materials or thinking about the perfect style to implement a device to teach is "how effectively one can make use of teaching plays or novels through movies, podcasts, web pages and power point slides"[20]. Newly there are good technological resources on novels or plays available in any university. In this case some relevant movies were given to students to watch. Not always the movie, play or audio book is interesting to view or listen to. Yet attention must be paid to the fact that full length plays or movies were less interesting to the students, thus it was necessary to assign a group work in which every student watched a 20 minutes part and shared his or her experiences with the rest of the class.

As the first experience in implementing such technologies in teaching in an innovative way, in two of these cases a PowerPoint presentation of important scenes in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Life and Death of Dr. Faustus* and another one on *Gone With the Wind* were prepared and its importance was discussed in the classroom. Instead of watching the full length play, the play was cut into synopsis. A section of the text was read and some were viewed, additionally video and sound editing software were prepared. These edited video and audio clips were very effectively used in a PowerPoint presentation. Preparing all of these slides is time consuming, but it was worthwhile experience as the learning/ teaching trend was facilitated and interesting, especially to those with a weaker linguistic competence.

In addition to the above experiment another one was used in teaching poetry. It is believed that "apart from novels and plays in the teaching of Poetry ICT tools can be a great help too"[21]. Teaching poetry is not an easy task to be done successfully by every teacher. Of all the genres of literature, it is the most difficult. The real "beauty and meaning of poetry lies in its recitation" [22]. Not all teachers are good at reciting. And even someone that is good at reciting may face problems with various poems, ballads, epics, lyrics and sonnets. Websites like: www.librivox.org or www.classicpoetryaloud.com which have a very good collection of poems in audio version, recited by the native speakers were found a unique source. In an experiment a power point presentation with the text of the poems and the mp3 file as well as some pictures showing the imagery in Shakespeare's "Winter" and "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summers' Day" was used after the students were asked to read and discuss their ideas which was totally disappointing as no one could imagine the images or detect the sound devices or even read the poems in tune, but after the power point was used, even the weakest students said they have understood the poems.

When a teacher uses ICT tools in the classroom, it helps a lot as three senses work together to increase students' proficiency. This leads to students' expression power, as they themselves have seen and listened to poems, pictures, graphics, text etc, they can express themselves quite well in examination. In traditional lecture method only one sensory perception – listening – is functioning. At the same time we can concentrate more on the number of students on the point of discussion. Psychologically speaking it has had a better impact to empower and improve their proficiency level.

III. CONCLUSION

As earlier discussed the application of communication technologies, especially the virtual ones in teaching resulted in facilitating the learning process. Since the cultural gaps to understanding were bridged, it was found useful too. 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.

To conclude it must be noted that 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. The internet's vast libraries of information can easily shed light on a wide variety of subjects, making the choice of topic easier on the pupil. The internet is not only a library itself, but can also point the way to physical books, articles and journals in actual libraries which provide the foundation needed to start writing. Additionally, by being able to communicate with millions of other people, it offers a seemingly endless pool of ideas on how to approach a given topic.

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