FAAPI

Bridging the gap between traditional literature and new digital forms: A practical basis for EFL teachers

Lucía Beatriz Quiroga*

Instituto de Formación Docente Continua, San Luis, Argentina

Abstract

The purpose of this work is to present a set of sample activities as a starting point to develop the literary competence through literature and Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class. The theoretical framework proposed is a combination of literary and technology-oriented approaches that offer a wide space for transaction, participation and cultural interaction. The practical proposal stems from the author's teaching experience, and emphasizes the understanding of literary dimensions through personal involvement and the generation of a dynamic space of experimentation. By means of fostering the literary experience in our teaching practices students will be able to form an opinion, judge information, and validate ideas. Literature and ICT constitute an excellent vehicle to achieve that objective.

Keywords: EFL teaching; electronic literature; literary competence; new literacies; personal enrichment.

Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es presentar un conjunto de actividades de muestra como punto de partida para desarrollar la competencia literaria a través de la literatura y las Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (TIC) en la clase de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera. El marco teórico propuesto resulta de una combinación de enfoques orientados hacia la literatura y TIC ya que ofrecen un amplio espacio para la transacción, la participación y la interacción cultural. La propuesta deriva de la experiencia docente de la autora, y hace hincapié en la comprensión de las dimensiones literarias a través de la implicancia personal y la generación de un espacio dinámico de experimentación. A través del desarrollo de la experiencia literaria en las prácticas docentes nuestros estudiantes podrán formarse para dar su opinión, juzgar información y validar ideas. La literatura y las TIC constituyen un excelente vehículo para alcanzar dicho objetivo.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera; competencia literaria; literatura electrónica; nuevas alfabetizaciones; enriquecimiento personal.

* Corresponding author, e-mail: lucigalaxy@yahoo.com.ar

THE ROLE OF literature in EFL teaching bears a twofold character since it does not only aim at developing the students' linguistic skills, but also at broadening their *literary competence*. The linguistic competence implies the acquisition of the lexical, grammatical and generic knowledge of the foreign language needed to communicate; the literary competence, on the other hand, entails a mayor level of complexity, since it implies the development of associative abilities and evaluative thinking as a result of the articulation between comprehension abilities, literary and intercultural knowledge, and habits and attitudes at cognitive, linguistic and emotional levels (Tabernero & Dueñas, 2003). But in this day and age, the teaching of literature in the EFL curriculum faces one more challenge: the emergence of ICT and its impact on educational practices. Verbal language has stopped being the only means of representation for the construction of meaning long ago; in fact, it coexists with other forms of language, such as the visual and audiovisual. The digital world has already started to gain ground in our society, thus affecting the usual process of reading and embracing the emergence of new literacies. Far from threatening the presence of literature in the curricula, new digital technologies offer a fresh ground for dealing with novel ways of reading and new literary formats. It is of my concern to refer to the ways in which these elements are being combined and deployed in the field of literature and EFL learning.

The purpose of the present work is to contribute to the development of the students' literary competence in the EFL class by suggesting a practical basis to work with literature and ICT. The article also stands as an invitation for students and teachers to experience literature by applying interactive online techniques in order to achieve learning and personal enrichment through the pleasure of reading literature. The present work is the result of the author's own teaching experience in the realm of literature at private and public institutions. It consists of a set of sample activities that deal with three literary texts targeted for readers of different ages and levels. Each of the sequences holds a distinct relationship between literary texts and digital media, which point to enhance student engagement with innovative literary works through multimodal reading and online activities. The activities are meant to stand as pedagogical opportunities that entail the application of free-to-use online resources by blending technology and literature-oriented approaches.

Theoretical Framework

The present proposal is based on the conception of literature as a multifaceted phenomenon of human experience that enables both the expression and the creation of cultures (Carter & Long, 1991; Lazar, 1993). Thus, I consider literariness from a broad and comprehensive perspective: as a set of elements whose *texture* includes the distinctive linguistic aspects of literary art, as well as essential components of literature

such as content, plot, theme, symbol, imagination, context and culture, among others. Accordingly, the emergent digital literary forms[1] here addressed are contained in this conception of literature, since it acknowledges the changing nature of literature in the contemporary digital landscape and its more than effective articulation with other media. Following Aarseth (1997), I will hereby adopt the umbrella term *cybertextuality* to refer to different digital literary texts mechanically organized and digitally mediated (digital publications, hypertexts, digitally generated texts, etc.), which are in turn comprised in the realm of *e-literature*[2].

The effective development of the literary competence through literature and ICT entails a coherent combination of pedagogical approaches that help bridge the gap between literary comprehension and literary competence. The framework here suggested includes approaches that address both the knowledge of the discipline and the knowledge of technology, in order to achieve understanding of the literary dimensions through multimodal reading and online resources. The specific methodological approaches to the teaching of literature that emerge from such a proposal are: the *Literature as Content Approach*, for which literature itself is the nodal constituent, and focuses on literary elements such as context, genre, theme, setting, symbol etc.; the *Literature for Personal Enrichment Approach*, whose fundamental assumption is that literature is a valuable tool for individuals to connect with their own life experiences, feelings and emotions (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 3); the *Intercultural Approach*, which guides students' experiences to the analysis of both the foreign culture as well as their own. This approach allows students to access and confront various cultural universes, and thanks to the experience of otherness, to discover facets of their own cultural and social identity.

The methodological approach to ICT chosen for this work is the *Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge* (TPACK), which brings forward a substantial basis for integrating technologies to education. TPACK offers an interesting interplay between the different types of knowledge teachers should master–the Technological, Pedagogical and Content knowledge–to better integrate technologies to their teaching practices, without neglecting their complex and multifaceted nature. Content knowledge refers to the disciplinary knowledge of the subject that is to be taught, which should be fully mastered and comprehended by the teacher; pedagogical knowledge makes reference to the deep knowledge of approaches and methods which are present in the teaching and learning processes; technological knowledge focuses on the knowledge of traditional and new technologies to be applied in our teaching practices. TPACK does not only consider the above mentioned sources of knowledge, but it also focuses on new forms of knowledge generated by the combination of the former; the constant interplay among these components is not static, it remains in constant tension and displays a varying nature. This variation requires from the teacher a constant reconfiguration of

his/her understanding of the three components (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). The dynamic, transactional relationship between these components of knowledge in context provides an effective, significant teaching experience, since it does not favour any source of knowledge over the other, but it adjusts to the necessities of the context.

Let it be added that the constant interaction among these approaches implies a migration from the concept of literature as an addition of static knowledge to an idea of literature as experience, i.e. as a "dynamic space of experimentation" (Leibrandt, 2007, p. 2).

The connection between the previously mentioned approaches and the sample activities presented will be addressed in the description section of this work.

Description of Sample Activities

The proposal consists of three sets of sample activities that have been arranged into sequences, ranging from levels A2 to B1+ of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Even though the activities have been tailored for low CEFR levels, the literary texts here addressed have not undergone linguistic adaptation. The criteria selection of the literary texts is based on two aspects: that they are somehow technology-oriented; that they are innovative and tend to trace new paths to dealing with literature. The established relationships among literary texts and digital media are different for each sequence; the categorization followed to describe them is the one proposed by Unswoth (2008) in his classification of books and computer-based literary narratives[3]. The activities in the three sequences aim at providing online contexts for developing understanding about different dimensions of the literary experience, all of which foster the literary competence by including strategies that encourage exploration, enticement to read, appreciation of a particular literary aspect, interpretation, evaluation and creation, among others. All three sequences follow the usual class stages of *before*, *while* and *after* reading sections, which in this case aim at shaping the literary competence through the demarcation of different literary *moments*.

The first sequence (see Appendix A), *A children's poet*, deals with a traditional poem for kids that has been digitalised for distribution and spreading purposes. Some of the main reasons why the poem was chosen lie on its versatility, its musical and lighthearted character and the playfulness of its nature. This first sequence falls into the category of *digitally-augmented* literary text, or perhaps digitally-augmented experience of literary text, since it consists of a text which has been originally published in book format, but has been augmented with online resources that enhance the story-world of the book (Unsworth, 2008). The general focus of this sequence lies on familiarization with the genre, interaction with the author, and enticement of imagination. The sequence is meant to be dealt with kids ranging between 7 to 10 years in a 2-class-period; one for dealing

with the first two stages and the other for working on the after-reading-section. Both the activities suggested for the *first reading moment* clearly aim at generating positive expectations on the poem to be read, since they invite the students to discuss a fantastic character they already know, and later to imagine the features of the creatures to be read about in the poem. In the while-reading-section the teacher entices the students to use their imagination to portray the creatures present in the poem and their main abilities by using free-to-use software. This stage also focuses on the linguistic aspect of the text, since it invites students to explore on the internet the verb actions present in the poem. The following activity focuses on the rhythmic aspect of the genre, placing its emphasis on the musicality of the rhymes and the possibilities of poetry performing. Encouraging students into listening to themselves ultimately leads them into experiencing this type of literary genre in a more dynamic and appealing way. The proposal for the after-reading-stage is to contact the author and to further explore the genre by indulging into the implications of the author's writing process; that the kids are able to debate on the abstraction of this aspect is certainly one of the most valuable elements of the sequence. A final activity that aims at fostering imagination and creation has been left at the end the sequence, by using kid-friendly software to create their own stories. Even though all the approaches mentioned in this work are somehow present in the sequence, the emphasis has clearly been placed on the *Literature as Content Approach* (specific focus on author and genre) and the TPACK Approach (content and technological knowledge have been combined to explore the genre, to gather information, to express themselves and create their own stories by using specific knowledge oriented online resources).

The second sequence (see Appendix B), *A sense of belonging*, is addressed to young adult readers. The literary text employed for this sequence is an adaptation of a picture book by Shaun Tan into a short animated film. This type of literary material was selected on the basis of its thematic originality and emotional content. In this case, audiovisual material has been successfully adapted, in the sense that it faithfully maintains the spirit of the book format. This story belongs to the category of *digitally re-contextualized* literary text, given that it was first published in book form and then re-published online as a digital text. The sequence explores thematic aspects of the text, the author's life and productions, and the dialogic relation between image and text. In certain cases, the role and function of images in the literary text not only facilitates the process of reading but it also takes a step towards greater narrative complexity, as the reader can make associations and inferences between what they read and what they see (Wensell, 2006). Images serve a narrative function when they contribute to the construction of history and meaning in the process of interaction with the verbal text (Cianciolo, 2001). Due to the emphasis the author has placed on certain intrinsic human aspects present in the story, the sequence also deals with feelings and emotions, and draws on creative aspects

based on personal experiences.

This sequence has been created for adolescents between 15 and 17 years old and it is suggested for a 3-class-period. The first reading stage mainly focuses on introducing the students into the world of fantasy and emotions and on generating the adequate atmosphere for the reading. It also draws on students' prior knowledge about some historical material, and later leads them to a full exploration on the author's life and appreciation of his work and productions. The while-reading-stage invites the students to watch a part of the video and to immediately draw on their personal emotions; they are later led to watch the full version of the story and deal with comprehension activities combined with analytical and inferential ingredients. For the following class the students are asked to discuss the complex relationship between text and images–and between the audio and visual elements as well–and rely on both to decode meanings from the story. Let it be added that the ability to read different types of speech and literary language is also an expected ability of the competent reader of literature. The use of online resources is proposed here for students to express, appreciate and share their immediate experiences with the literary text. For a third class, students will be prompted to use more complex software to present either a special creation triggered by the story, or some research on other illustrators.

The theoretical approaches prominent in this sequence are the *Literature for Personal Enrichment Approach*, since the literary piece is used as a resource to draw on the students' personal experiences and emotions; the *Intercultural Approach*, given that the story addresses the existence of two coexisting worlds and leads to the understanding and acceptance of both.

The third sequence ([Appendix C]), *Meeting point*, deals with a hypertext narrative[4] that belongs to the category of *digitally originated* literary texts. Since the experience of reading this type of digital literature is completely different to dealing with traditional texts, the focus of the sequence also varies a little and draws on the process of reading in itself. It also tackles aspects related to authorship, intertextuality and the metacognitive experience of reading hypertext as a genre. This literary text was chosen for the innovative character of its genre, which is exclusively digitally-oriented and entirely experimental.

The sequence is suggested for adults to be dealt with in a 2-class-period. The first reading stage aims at arousing interest through previous reading experiences and at making intertextual connections with the genre. The while-reading-stage is meant to explore the reading paths of the literary text, and to work on comprehension activities in combination with analysis and evaluation of particular excerpts. Students are also supposed to reflect on their own process of reading (metacognition) by capturing this experience into another digital format (visual presenters). A collaborative experience

has been suggested for the after-reading-process, which can be left for subsequent classes or just as a take-home-task.

The approaches emphasised in this sequence are (1) the Literature as Content Approach, since the genre is fully explored as the main element of the sequence; (2) TPACK, as it is required from the teacher to effectively combine content and (3) technological knowledge, to be able to make content transfer and genre adaptation.

Conclusion

What we clearly see emerging in our contemporary digital landscape is a constant development of new literacies and a steady reconceptualization of traditional literature. These developments entail the revision–or integration–of technological knowledge in the field of education, combined with disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge as part of the teacher's background. In this sense, literature has much to gain if it remains open to the new digital developments, since the effective combination of both fields has much to offer to the ongoing development of literary competence. As seen in the activities description, literature in the EFL class can be approached to different extents and through different methods. All the activities were presented in the three conventional reading stages that designate the broad 'moments' of reading, though in all three sequences the before-reading-stage is intended to arouse the students' interest and expectations, and make intertextual connections to the texts. The while-reading-stage points at enticing the students to read, to explore and imagine, appreciating the literary text and to analyse and interpret the literary content; the after-reading-stage aims at recreating the moments of the reading, and encourages personal appreciation and evaluation of the work rather than its mere understanding. The three sequences undoubtedly address different aspects of the development of literary competence, since they move from one stage to the other suggesting activities that move from lower to higher order thinking skills.

Certainly this work has not delved into the role of the teacher as a mediator in the process of reading in English. However, this work leaves some questions regarding the lack of training of teachers of English in the implementation of ICT, since the unfamiliarity of both teachers and students with particular online resources and software might lead to unexpected results that hinder the richness of this type of teaching practice. Narrowing this gap would involve reviewing the curricula of Literature in the English Teaching Program and embracing a plan of change. Since literature has opened up to include other media (visual, auditory, and digital), it is necessary to include models for a critical and innovative approach to teaching. Our role as educators gives us the chance to help bridge the gap between traditional and digital literary forms by engaging students into the pleasure of reading as part of the training of competent readers.

Notes

1. Digitally originated literary forms are often referred to as *cybertexts* or *technotexts* (Aarseth, 1997; Hayles, 2002).
2. Electronic literature is generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitised, is "digital born" and (usually) meant to be read on a computer (Hayles, 2008).
3. Digitally-*augmented* literary texts; digitally-*recontextualised* literary text; digitally-*originated* literary text or *hypertext narratives*.
4. Hypertext narrative is a genre of electronic literature, characterized by the use of hypertext links which provide a new context for non-linearity in literature and reader interaction (Bishop, 2009).
5. For appendices, follow these links: Appendix A, Appendix B, Appendix C.

References

Aarseth, E. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ávila Zamorano, J. (2008). *La progresión temática y tópica de narraciones infantiles en lengua inglesa. Un estudio contrastivo por edades*. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.

Bishop, J. (2009). Enhancing the understanding of genres of web-based communities: The role of the ecological cognition framework. *International Journal of Web-Based Communities, 5*(1), 4-17.

Carter, R., & Long, M. (1991). *Teaching literature*. UK: Longman.

Hayles, N. K. (2002). *Writing machines*. Cambridge, MA/ London: The MIT Press.

Hayles, N. K. (2008). About electronic literature: New horizons for the literary. Retrieved from: http://newhorizons.eliterature.org/index.php

Koehler, M. J., & Mishra, P. (2009). What is technological pedagogical content knowledge? *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 9*(1), 60-70.

Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leibrandt, I. (2007). La didáctica de la literatura en la era de la medialización. *Espéculo, 36*, XII. Retrieved from: http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero36/didalite.html

Tabernero, R., & Dueñas, J. (2003). La adquisición de la competencias literaria: Una propuesta para las aulas de infantil y primaria. In A. Mendoza & P. Cerrillo (Coords.), *Intertextos: Aspectos sobre la recepción del discurso artístico* (pp. 301-335). Cuenca: Universidad Castilla-La Mancha.

Unsworth, L. (2008). E-literature, multimedia authoring and metalanguage: New literacies and literary engagement in the middle school years. *Synergy, 6*(1), 20-27.

Wensell, U. (2006). La imagen y la palabra. Reflexiones en torno a una conversación. *Primeras Noticias, 222*, 19-25.