Making sense of Literary Works through Customised Digital Books

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to highlight the integration of electronic books besides paper books into literature curriculum in English as a Foreign Language Context (EFL). It aims at providing ideas and strategies to be integrated within the digitised version of a literary work and to question their effectiveness on learners' understanding, engagement and involvement in the learning process. To address this issue, a customised digitised play was implemented with a group of forty undergraduates reading for a BA of English. At the end of the play study, Students' questionnaire was collected and its analysis revealed a positive feedback. Participants expressed their satisfaction towards this technology and expressed their willingness to see this pedagogy generalised to the study of all literary works. Therefore, integrating customised digital books in literature curriculum is recommended as a facilitating and motivational pedagogy in an EFL context. However, technical difficulties were met and a need for continuous technical support proved to be obligatory in case of generalisation and application of this method to all compulsory literary works.
Keywords: customized digital books, literature curriculum, motivating, understanding, efl context

Introduction

Teaching literature module to EFL learners has always been daunting. Learners show a low performance in understanding plays, novels and poems and consequently develop a negative attitude and reluctance to engage into the study of these literary works. Students of English in our faculty of foreign languages express their dissatisfaction and the frustration they are left with whenever they approach a literary text because they often find it difficult to unpack the meaning of words and figurative language within a poem or passage and cannot not make sense of what they read. They not only find literary language difficult but they also complain about the way their teacher conduct literature course. On their account, most of the lecture goes over their heads and is teacher directed and thus is meaningless for them. They also complain about the shortage of books supply at the library. So, if EFL learners fail in understanding and appreciating literary texts, developing new methodologies and strategies to remedy to this problematic learning situation becomes urgent. One recommended method which has never been applied in the faculty of foreign languages is integrating digital or electronic books, customised according to learners' needs in literature classroom.

This experimental study aims at investigating the use of digitised also called electronic or e-books customised according to learners' needs and fathom how this technology can motivate and provide facilities to EFL learners in the study of literary works. It aims at providing ideas and strategies to be integrated within the digitized version of literary works to facilitate understanding and enhance learners' engagement and involvement in the learning process. Considering the aforementioned learners' difficulties, we hypothesise that learners understanding of literary works can be improved if literary works are digitised and enriched with hypertexts that provide vocabulary and figurative language explanation, historical information and make characters and events vivid through images and videos. etc.

Literature Review

In recent years, electronic books have known a boom in educational settings changing the way students learn. Some educators see this technology as an effective tool that contributes to enhancing the learning process and helps teachers to improve learners' performance. Digital or e-books offer an incredible amount of information, tools for teaching and learning and thus, gained many supporters in the field. Researchers as (Finger, McGlasson & Finger, 2007; Kozma, 2003) are convinced that e-books and other devices such as hyperlinks and other software, if well used, will bring a positive change in the world of education.

Ihmeideh (2014) brings up the point that today's young generation of learners is being raised in a digital-media world. learners are exposed to multiple forms of technology every day and are familiar with accessing information through smartphones and Internet while reading. This fact facilitates the task for teacher to apply this technology in their classrooms.

Defining e-book, Hypertext and Hypermedia

An e-book is a book in an electronic format that can be read on a screen. It has numbered pages, table of content, exactly as a paper book. Collins English Dictionary defines an "e-book as a book which is produced for reading on a computer screen[i]". Some e-books are replicas of print books, whereas others are designed in such a way that they can integrate technological devices which afford a variety of digital resources as hypertexts into a single package.

Hypertexts refer to an information system designed to make information easier to find or create. It is often represented by a network of nodes and of connections, in which the nodes are documents (or resources) and the links, references between the nodes. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, hypertext is "an arrangement of the information in a computer database that allows a user to get information and to go from one document to another by clicking on highlighted words or pictures".

In turn, hypermedia is defined as an extension of hypertext. It is often used to designate a hypertext in which the nodes are not just textual record but can be other media such as image, video or sound. Thesaurus Dictionary defines hypermedia as "a system in which various forms of information, as data, text, graphics, video, and audio, are linked together by a hypertext program".

Indeed, hypermedia means different media that may be combined together as text, still and animated images, sound and video. They are interconnected and can be called by users at one click. Image, sound and video are linked with buttons to click on. When a learner clicks on or selects one item, he is sent to another related item or he can see information displayed in a tooltip. A tooltip is a pop-up text that is displayed when a user positions the cursor over a word. When integrated within a text, they offer learners a way to explore information in depth according to their needs and at their pace (Collier, 1987). These elements make hypermedia a rich and engaging learning environment that enhances learners' motivation and involvement (Chomsky, 1990). Undeniably, many contemporary scholars believe that hypermedia is suited to teaching, learning and assessment.

Many researches as (Chou, 2016; Huang, 2013; Lam et al., 2009) have been conducted on the use of digital books which are just an electronic version of paper books as Hayles, (2002) states: "a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer" (p.3). Project Gutenberg is a good example. It offers over 57,000 free eBooks that can be read online or down loaded. However, little studies have been conducted on customised digital books which are more sophisticated electronic books that go beyond the paper version and offer devices that motivate language foreign learners to read.

Most of those studies report negative results and no significant changes in learners' behaviour (e.g., Daniel & Woody, 2013). McFall (2005) finds that customised digital books

are challenging and unfamiliar. In fact, the transition from print to digital books is not always so easy for it needs efforts and understanding of the specific nature of digital books enriched with hyperlinks. Teachers need to know basics of programming, a general understanding software environment and of how computer programs work. Many websites offer services to digitalise and even customize a book. Concerning learners, they are accustomed to use technology in their everyday life, though an introduction to the use of digital personalised book in the classroom should be organised before immersing in the course. In what follows, thus, our attention will mainly focus on benefits of digital books and hypermedia use some strategies that may be used to enhance learners' understanding and involvement in the learning process.

Benefits of electronic books and hypermedia for convenience and differentiation

Digital books solve the problem of insufficient supply of paper books learners complained about. They can download or record the electronic customized version of the literary work under study on their USB device for free. Some web sites propose electronic editions of literary texts as the work of Project Gutenberg that proposes electronic versions of classics that are part of literature curriculum as Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer, Charles Dicken's A Tale of Two Cities and more than 57 737 digitalised books free to download. In this way, learners can have access to digital books under study from a personal computer, a laptop or smartphone in the classroom as well as from home. They can read, adjust the font size and brightness of the text at their convenience, benefiting from hypertext devices already prepared by teachers.

Moreover, it is known that students do not learn in the same way and that matching their learning styles with appropriate instructional strategies improves their ability to concentrate and learn (Carbo & Hodges, 1988). Digital books allow differentiation, i.e., They offer teachers the possibility to design lessons based on specific student attributes, including *interest* (what subjects inspire students to learn), *readiness* (what students have learned and still need to learn), or *learning style* (the ways in which students tend to learn material best[ii]). In this way, teachers can expand learning opportunities to students who may not have done as well using traditional materials. Woody, et al. (2010) found e-books to offer greater flexibility, accessibility and proved increased visual appeal.

Virtual reality to stimulate understanding

Another key advantage of using customised digital books in literature classroom in an EFL context is the additional features that can be integrated to aid the teacher in teaching as videos about historical events that can "bring life to history" as virtual museum tours that can enable teachers to bring EFL learners on virtual trips and get them immersed in the setting and events of the story as done in this experiment study. Arthur Miller's digitised play offers a hyperlink that guides learners to Salem, Massachusetts, which is well known as the site of the execution of 20 citizens for supposed witchcraft following a series of trials in 1692. The memorial site for those 20 victims serves as a reminder of the mass hysteria that occurred at that time.

From their classrooms all learners can take a step back in time and visit the street from where many of the witch examinations took place. Events of the story under analysis take form and become vivid living images that speak to learners more than words. This facilitating application helps EFL learners to make sense of the story. This technique can be used before reading the story, as a warm up to introduce the story to learners. Salomon (1988), Scardamalia & Bereiter (1991) find knowledge with hypermedia much easier than with paper because hypermedia can make knowledge explicit and thus help learners internalize and make sense of what they learn.

Glosses creation to facilitate vocabulary understanding

In studying literary works, the main difficulty EFL learners encounter is the need for vocabulary support. A long-debated question is whether language foreign learners should infer meaning of unknown words from the text or should they simply be given the meaning of the lexical item? Hulstjin,(1992) asserts that "meaning must be inferred from context by learners themselves" (p. 113). He Insists on the mental effort hypothesis and claimed that a word meaning is better acquired when efforts are made to understand than when meaning is given.

This is an accepted logic; however, foreign language learners find literary language more difficult than a native or second language learner because it does not always obey to language rules and is imbedded with culture. As previously mentioned, EFL students complain about vocabulary difficulty and find it a barrier to understanding. Thus, if there is no understanding, there will be no language acquisition as Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis asserts that a second or a foreign language is acquired by "understanding messages or receiving comprehensible input" (p. 2). This is the objective justifying the insertion of glosses hyperlinks within the literary text under study.

In the study of Arthur Miller's play 'The Crucible', a glossary of key important words that were deemed necessary for overall comprehension of the play is inserted to enable students look up unknown words to grasp the overall sense of events. This device gives students interactive vocabulary help by clicking on a highlighted word to see a pop-up displayed with explanation. The aim behind hyperlink insertion is making the reading process less daunting and more successful so as EFL learners will be encouraged to continue reading the literary work under study using the language and improving their linguistic skills.

Film insertion to enhance understanding

Many researchers have reported that the use of films helps EFL learners to visualize clearly different event of the story as well as cultural aspects found in the text (Muller, 2006). Advocates of this pedagogy consider multimedia as videos and films as a rich authentic and motivating teaching resource as Champoux (1999), Allan (1985), Stoller (1988), Katchen (2003) and Sufen (2006). They state that multimedia as films and videos not only bring authenticity and variety into the classroom, but also facilitate understanding through image and sound.

Making use of such technology as e-book combined with hypermedia in an EFL context helps reading comprehension of literature because it is more animated and vivid than paper book (Maynard & Cheyne, 2005; Korat, 2010). Chun & Plass (1996) stated that multimedia as video and sound have a great potential to support text understanding. Similarly, Willingham's (2009) asks a simple question in his research to make his point, "Why do students remember everything that's on television and forget what we lecture?" – Because visual media help students retain concepts and ideas.

In the study of Arthur Miller's, The Crucible, inserting the whole film version of the play within the digitized book proves to be difficult because of the size of the file. The solution has been embedding YouTube within the e-book as a "widget" which is an application, or a component of an interface, that enables a user to perform a function or access a service. All what learners have to do is to click on film tooltip, and the e-book accesses the web, streaming the video from the cloud. Many masterpieces have been represented through films as Victor Fleming's Gone with the Wind (1939), Nicholas Hytner's The Crucible (1998) and Joe Wright's Pride and Prejudice (2005).

Moreover, it has been proved that eBooks can effectively assist learning process in EFL context, helping learners to make sense of what they read by promoting a learner-centered environment and bringing about new ways of thinking about and organizing materials and as a result increase students' motivation. Harste (2010) states that learners will be able to "actively read, interpret, talk back to texts, as well as identify the many visible and invisible messages that comprises theses texts" (p. 32). Interacting with eBooks will motivate learners to engage in reading-related activities that will allow them to overcome learning barriers (Shamir& Kora, 2015; Ciampa, 2012).

The education literature suggests that learners who are actively immersed in the learning process will be more likely to achieve success (Dewar, 1999). Once learners are actively involved in achieving tasks, searching for and gathering information, they will feel empowered and will develop self-esteem and confidence. (Stoller, 2006) believes that the most important characteristic of hypermedia (text and video) is its ability to encourage students to develop a positive attitude towards learning.

Indeed, a large number of researches have already been conducted to investigate the effect of electronic books on students' attitude, motivation and learning progress. Positive feedback has been reported by Rozel and Gardner (2000), Mynard and Mcknight (2006) and Hwang et al, (2014). Other reliable studies have proven the efficacy of e-books in decreasing the achievement learning gap and promoting learning (Korat & Shamir, 2012; Segal-Drori, Korat, Shamir & Klein, 2010; Shamir & Korat, 2015).

However, what distinguishes the present study from others is that it investigates the effects of enhancing EFL learners reading literary works through the use of customised digital books and considers effective strategies for supporting EFL learners' understanding

and engagement in a EFL context. It aims at providing ideas and strategies to be integrated within the digitized version of a literary work and to question their effectiveness on learners' understanding, engagement and involvement in the learning process.   The strategies highlighted in the experiment turn around digitised book customised to serve learners' need.

Method

To address this issue, a digitized play personalized according to learners' needs was designed and put into practice along six weeks. At first, a brief account on digital books and hypertext was presented with an emphasis on hypertext and hypermedia integration and how they support learning. Then, some strategies and techniques on how to use these devices were provided. After, the method applied to evaluate course effectiveness was explained, then followed the discussion of the findings and conclusion with some recommendations.

Digitised literary work used in this study

The literary work used in this experimental study is Arthur Miller's The Crucible downloaded from a free access web site[iii], then converted into WinWord and customized with hypermedia combining text, images and video. Authors' biography, Characters' list, glosses, virtual historical museum tour about Salem (the setting of the story) and the play film. These hyperlinks were designed to support learners while achieving assigned tasks as characters' description, plot analysis, themes etc. The aim was not to discuss how to analyse a literary work, but how to assist EFL learners overcome language difficulty, lack of enthusiasm and to guide them to make sense and appreciate what they read.

Pedagogical steps

Week I, session1 started with an explanatory session organised to explain the experiment to learners. Once students understood that the participation in the experiment was not compulsory and was not linked to the completion of the accredited module, students agreed to embark in the trial. The digital play was presented and made available for recording on USB device. Learners were invited to start reading the digital play and to view the film at home for time constraint. The play comprises four acts. Each act has been studied in one week (3 hours) dealing with the context, characters and plot analysis, symbols and themes. Devices aforementioned were used by learners while dealing with different activities.

Participants

The case study undertaken was a volunteering project that took place at the department of English during a six-week period. There were 40 undergraduates reading for a BA of English, aged between 19 and 22 years. The research focus was on integrating hypermedia into a digital paly and evaluating its efficiency on learners' understanding, motivation and involvement in the reading process.

A mixed method combining qualitative and quantitative data collection was used in the experiment. Qualitative data was collected via a survey questionnaire assigned at the end of the 6 weeks experiment. Anonymity was provided to enable learners express their

opinions freely and to collect valid and truthful data. Besides, a Teaching Method Attitude Questionnaire was designed to assess learners' feedback about the digital customized play. The questionnaire contained a five-point Likert Scale numeric indicator ranging from 5 to 1 indicating learners' agreement or disagreement on a particular item. The questionnaire also addressed their perception towards the digital personalised paly, the pertinence of different hypertext and hypermedia inserted learners' degree of involvement in assigned tasks, and attitude positive towards this pedagogy. An open-ended question was assigned to give learners freedom to make suggestions about literature curriculum.

Findings and Discussion

The first question was designed to gauge the degree of familiarity of learners with electronic devices as laptop, tablets, smartphones and desk computer as well as social media.

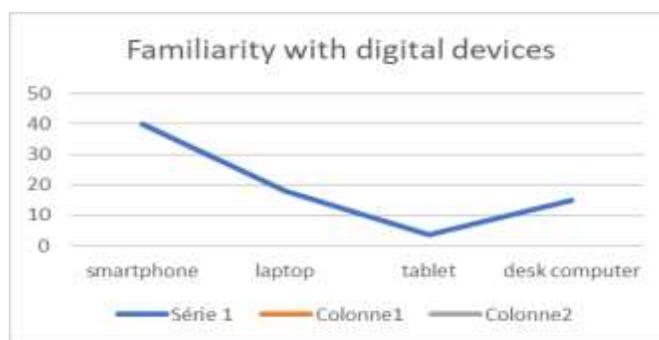- Do you have a smartphone, a tablet, a laptop or a desk computer?

Figure 1 familiarity with digital devices

The 40 participants declared possessing a smartphone, 18 a laptop, 15 a desk computer and seven a tablet.

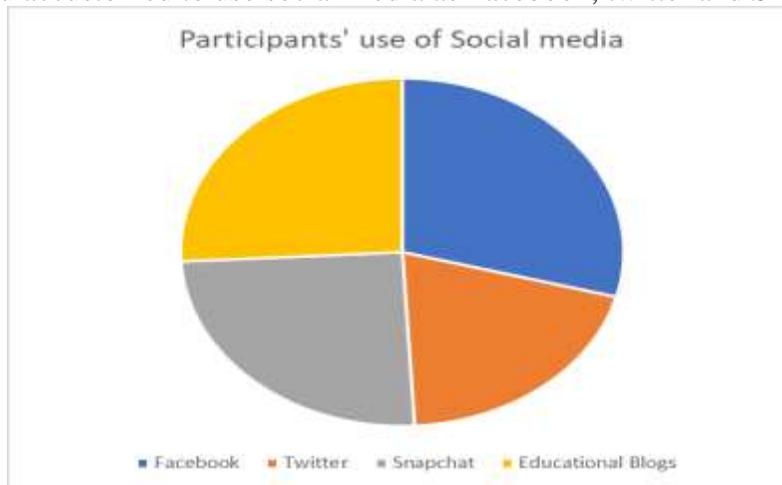- are you accustomed to use social media as Facebook, twitter and Snapchat?

Figure2 Participants' use of social media

All participants said they are familiar with these media. Facebook comes at the first position, then snapchat, educational blogs and then Twitter. From these answers sample, all participants were not beginners in the use of digital devices. To the question how much time do you connect to internet, they said more than 12 times a day. This explains the easiness observed while utilising the digital book.

In regard to Teaching Method Attitude Questionnaire (TMAQ), all participants appreciated having their own personal digital book that they can keep and take home. They also expressed their satisfaction with reading the story on the screen and found it easy to adapt to their convenience. All of them improved their cognitive learning and understanding of the play. They found that hypermedia inserted within the play facilitated understanding and made reading less daunting. They assured that having the glossary available at one click, helped them with difficult words. Furthermore, they loved the hyperlink of Characters' list with their corresponding photographs. They said that this helped them visualise the characters. All of learners said that this link clarified the relationship between actors of the story and made the conflict easier to identify. All participants loved the virtual Museum Tour which took them hundreds year back in time helping them contextualise the story and understand some aspects of American history.

Above all, learners appreciated the link that directs them to YouTube to watch either an extract of an act, or the whole play video with captioning. Being able to move from reading to watching the play helped them understand better and appreciate events of the story. However, listening to native speakers speaking old English remained a challenge for 20 of the participants. 15 of participants confessed they used the story book while watching the video for more understanding. All participants stated that the customised digital play helped them achieving assigned tasks and changed the classroom atmosphere which encourages discussion and improved learners-teacher relationship. In the open-ended question all 40 participants expressed their satisfaction with this 'new' pedagogy and wanted to see this experiment generalised to the whole literary course. Participants even offered their help for digitizing other literary works, and showed expertise in inserting images, video and in designing very attractive and meaningful PowerPoint presentations. In brief, the use of digital play and hypermedia proved to be positive.

To sum up, this study was a successful and fruitful experiment in terms of students' involvement and motivation. Cognitive outcomes were achieved much more than what we imagined. The digital customized play generated enthusiasm, provided students more freedom and choice in retrieving subject resources and helped them to develop computer and information literacy skills. All in all, the prime objective of the research had been fulfilled. The major focus was to test whether this technology facilitates language understanding, attracts students' attention, develops a positive attitude within students towards literature and enhances their involvement in the learning process. Indeed, customised Digital Literature Course proved to be efficient and was able to change learners' reluctance and negative attitude into a positive and promising behaviour.

Conclusion

The unit sample described in this article is based on personalised digitalised literary work with insertion of hypertext guiding the reader towards understanding and reading with pleasure. The researcher claims that reading a literary work on the screen, enriched with vocabulary explanation, extra-information about characters' identity and images facilitates understanding. He also pretends that bringing the story with characters and events into life through video and virtual visits develops a positive attitude within the learner. Results' analysis come to reinforce assumptions made beforehand. Learners not only show interest and enthusiasm for this technology, but they also see their reading comprehension of the literary work improved. In brief, this pedagogy may contribute to face EFL learners' low performance and reluctance to study literature.

However, in case teachers want to used digital books and hypertext in teaching, they have to secure help and assistance from computing department or anyone who masters web applications. To be successful a huge work has to be accomplished in advance. The best suggestion is to convince colleague teachers and staff to engage in this issue so as to benefit from human and technical resources. This kind of experiments can be tackled within research laboratory activities to have more support, visibility and validity.

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