

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE LIGHT OF THE INTERNET AND GLOBALIZATION: READING AND WRITING

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ABSTRACT

With the diffusion of computers, digital technology, and cybercommunication, accompanied by the process of globalization, the conceptions of language learning especially reading and writing have changed dramatically. These skills are not considered any more as decoding and encoding abilities. It is recommended that these skills be enriched with the abilities needed for the effective negotiation and communication; and critical interpretation and evaluation. Teachers of English language learning classes are expected to go beyond the basic and mechanistic levels of teaching reading and writing and equip students with the strategies to handle new demands of the new era which has been dominated by the Internet and telecommunications. Moreover, English language learning teachers are required to accompany language learning with thinking skills, which are of critical importance in today `s world relationships.

Key Words: Internet, Globalization, language, learning, reading, writing.

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of ICT in the last several decades, accompanied by the process of globalization, the whole world has undergone drastic social, cultural, economic, political, and educational changes, requiring TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) professionals understand these changes and their impact on English language teaching.

Internet has made the world a small village in which everybody can express and elaborate his ideas easily and quickly. Maybe it was the Internet and digital technology that paved the way for globalization, and globalization in turn gave rise to relocalization and multiculturalism (Warschauer, 2000). People of this village through the net could talk about their own beliefs, project their own identities, and be familiar with other people and cultures. Cultures once neglected and overlooked and were in minority, now have found a cyberspace to make their own voice heard, and in a way they could rejuvenate and revive their forgotten and neglected cultures.

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The important medium of communication in this village is language. Language in this village plays the role of identity marker and masks race, gender, and socioeconomic status of people. For the first time in the history of mankind, nobody in this village can detect exactly who you are_ whether you are a black or white, male or female, rich or poor.

Once the language of this village was only English, because a high percentage of early users were North Americans and the computer scientists who designed personal computers and the Internet did so on the basis of the “American Code Information Interchange”(ASCII) Code, which made computing in other alphabets and character sets inconvenient or impossible. Therefore, English was dominant, and there was the fear that English language and culture might lead to the demise of other languages and cultures, but soon it was found that the fears of an English –dominant Internet were premature and English only was used as a medium of communication, as an international lingua franca. Though increasing numbers of people around the world turn to English as a requirement of international communication, they emphasize their own level of variety of English rather than submitting to colonial standard norms in order to project their identity and values, meaning that, they reject American English as the standard English language and try to utilize their own standards and norms (Warschauer, 2000). For example, in Europe, we witness the emergence of a Euro-English which has its own lexical patterns and its intonation pattern is more syllable-based than stress-based (Crystal, 1999). Therefore, different types of Englishes have come into existence which don’t comply with Anglo-American standards.

Moreover, recent analyses demonstrated that the number of non-English Web sites is growing rapidly and that many of the newly active Internet newsgroups extensively use the national language, in fact, by one account the proportion of English in computer-based communication is expected to fall from its high of 80 % to approximately 40 % within the next decades (Graddol, 1997). By the way, while more than 90 % of the early users of the Internet were located in North America, the net is now growing fast in developing countries like China, India, and Iran. Finally, new technology was used to allow the web to support English as an international lingua franca while simultaneously facilitating the use of other languages.

Scientists, scholars, researchers, and students of this village are lucky, because the Internet has made them a giant library, containing everything they want. Without departing home to go to the library, with waving a magic wand they can bring home the library itself and with a small touch on the keyboard they can enter into this worldwide electronic library. However, this library has two important problems; first, unlike the usual libraries in which you can view all the materials on shelves, in this e-library you have access only to a page and all information is hidden behind this page, and it needs knowledge and expertise in order to

view the material you want, and if you are gauche at using the Internet you may come up with lots of irrelevant information which makes you mystified. Second, due to publication restrictions in the typical libraries, the majority of books and materials have been written by learned people, but on the net everybody can have his own say and publish his ideas. Therefore, this gigantic e-library is replete with hotch potch of relevant and irrelevant, valuable and gibberish information and it depends on the expertise of the reader to muster the pertinent information he is after, separating the wheat from the chaff.

Since everything in this village has been computerized and digitalized, jobs that existed in the industrial era are disappearing and are being replaced by new types of jobs and work requirements that didn't exist before; jobs require information processing and analysis skills rather than brute force (Catelles, 1996), and no longer white and blue collar jobs are needed, what is required is symbolic analysts who spend much of their time analyzing symbol information, like software engineers (Reich, 1991).

Villagers are very happy in this cyberspace, because everybody without going to normal universities can be educated. Long-distance education is available for everybody and being educated in Oxford University is not far-fetched.

Customers in this village can buy whatever they want easily and quickly without leaving their homes, businessmen have found a good opportunity to commerce easily. Producers are very delighted because they can advertise and sell their products on the net. Employers can put up their notices for recruiting people and job-seekers can read them and apply for the position they want, wherever it is.

As we witness, this village is a little bit strange from the usual villages, demanding new ways of life and education. In fact, the situations in this cybervillage socially, educationally, and economically are very complex. To survive and be successful in this cybervillage you need to be equipped with different skills and literacies.

1. Literacy and Technology

Literacy is not a fixed and static concept and its notions change and develop as man changes and develops. Literacy theorists analyze the social, cultural, and cognitive aspects of literacy in a society. Although it is a commonsense belief that literacy involves a set of "context-neutral, value-free skills"(de Castell & Luke, 1986: 86) of coding and decoding texts, literacy theorists have demonstrated that literacy is instead a complex social practice (Gee, 1996). For example, de Castell and Luke demonstrated that the conceptions of literacy have actually gone through several major changes in the U.S history, from a classical view of literacy as cultivation of "civilized" person through understanding of literacy as

a progressive view of self-expression leading to the growth and development of a child, to a technocratic view of literacy as a functional skill leading to effective performance.

If we consider literacy as a complex, social practice, then transmission approach of filling students with information and facts and training approach of instructing them in isolated decoding skills become untenable. As Freire most famously emphasized, noting that literacy is not only about “reading the word” but also about “reading the world”_ and not only reading the world but also writing it and rewriting it (Freire & Macedo, 1987: 37). New technologies now provide a helpful resource for achieving this end, and to highlight Freire’s perspective, technology-based literacy is not only about surfing the net, it is also about making waves (Shneiderman, 1997). This post-modern era, digital technology, and cybercommunication require “electronic literacy” which needs different skills from those of print literacy and as Warschauer (1999) stated “Electronic literacy involves not only adapting our eyes to read from the screen instead of the page, but also adapting our vision of the nature of literacy and the purpose of reading and writing.”

Before the diffusion of computers and the Internet, reading and writing were defined as decoding and encoding of letters and words, but in the context of post-modern cultural developments and globalization, new ways of reading and writing which were not page-bound came into existence. These new ways of reading and writing involve a mixture of modalities, symbol systems, and languages. A typical Web page, for example, may involve still photographs, moving images (video clips), and audio recording in addition to written language. Apart from processing these different modalities of communication, “readers” will also have to interpret different sign-systems, such as icons and images, in addition to words. Furthermore, texts from languages as diverse as French and Arabic may be found in a site that is primarily in English. Different discourses could also be mixed – as legalese, medical terminology, and statistical descriptions, besides everyday conversational discourse. (Canagarajah, 2000). Therefore, this movement from page to screen requires new types of literacy or to be more exact multiliteracies.

2. Reading

Generally, reading skill in a language classroom is considered to be very important, because without this knowledge, students are not likely to be successful in the typical language class especially in EFL situations. Conceptions of reading have undergone different changes over time from the belief that reading is a passive skill to the idea that reading is psycholinguistic decoding of letters and words, demanding skimming, scanning, and guessing words from contexts (Chastain, 1988). Reading from the screen is less a passive act of decoding a message from a single authoritative author and more a self-conscious act of creating knowledge from a variety of sources (Landow, 1992). If we consider

reading a social practice that happens in particular sociocultural contexts (Gee, 1996) then in this information era which is dominated by English language and majority of people in the world to some extent are familiar with the ABC of reading, teachers of English language are expected to go beyond the mechanistic view of reading, familiarizing students with the strategies to tackle the problems they encounter while they are surfing the net. In light of the Internet, readers encounter different relevant or irrelevant articles and books, different people from different walks of life, and different pieces of reliable and unreliable news, which demand new skills to analyze them, and as Warschauer (2000) stated, readers should be equipped with the following skills:

- Finding the information to read in the first place (through Internet searches, etc.);
- Rapidly evaluating the source, credibility, and timeliness of information once it has been located;
- Rapidly making navigational decisions as to whether to read the current page of information, pursue links internal or external to the page, or revert back to further searching;
- Making on-the-spot decisions about ways to save or catalogue part of the information on the page or the complete page;
- Organizing and keeping track of electronic information that has been saved.

These may seem like esoteric skills for a class of beginning English learners who are still trying to figure out how to decode simple words. But as English expands in the 21st century as a language of international communication, the number of learners who master basic English skills will grow. Increasing number of learners throughout the world will find themselves in the situation of secondary students in many European countries today, where the challenge is not so much to achieve basic decoding skills but rather to use English for the types of complex global communication discussed earlier in this article.

None of these types of skills are completely new of course. The need for critical, active, and interpretive reading has been an important part of print literacy as well. Moreover, the vast amount of information available on the Internet and its hypertextual organization speed up changes in the nature of reading which were already occurring in the age of print, and make these kinds of critical reading skills all the more essential. To be equipped with these skills doesn't mean that while you are reading from pages you don't need to be equipped with these skills, but it means while reading from screen, these abilities are more essential.

By the way, while reading from the screen you need to be familiar with different skills, because it may have audio, video, and icons. And only a multiliterate person can deal with these issues and be successful.

3. Writing

Throughout human history, speech has been used for interaction and writing for its permanence, used for interpretation and reflection (Harnad, 1991). Writing, unlike speech, can be accessed and analyzed again and again by a limitless number of people at different times. It is for this reason that the development of writing and later print are viewed as having fostered revolutions in the production of knowledge and cognition. What is of critical importance in education is the intersection between interaction (speech) and reflection (writing) and this is the Internet that paved the way for this intersection. For the first time in history, human interaction takes place in a text-based form, and there is no longer any divide between speech and writing, writing equals speaking, meaning that, while you are writing in fact, you are speaking, of course with two important differences with the normal conversation. First of all, the written, computer-mediated mode of the discourse facilitates a special relationship between interaction and reflection, because you can freeze any frame you want and focus on it. This creates an excellent environment for a group of people to construct knowledge together by expressing themselves in print and then assessing, evaluating, and reflecting on their own views and those of others. A second difference is that the social dynamics of computer-mediated discussion have proven to be different from face-to-face discussion in relation to issues such as turn-taking, interruption, balance, equality, consensus, and decision-making (Warschauer, 1999). That is why, Harnad (1991) described the Internet as bringing about “the fourth revolution in the means of production of knowledge”, on a par with the “three prior revolutions in the evolution of human communication and cognition: language, writing, and printing”.

Paper and pencil writing is slow and clumsy way of exchanging ideas but on the net, the synchronous communication allows students to take part in discussion groups and online chats to express themselves. Therefore, if writing is the equivalent of speaking on the net; therefore, students are needed to be familiar with lots of skills to communicate effectively and quickly.

Moreover, the Internet is a good place for the projection of identities. Writing for the Web has emerged more recently. Studies by (Lam, 2000) and (Warschauer, 1999) have shown the central role of identity in Web-based writing; due to its highly public and multimodal nature, the Web is an ideal writing medium for students to explore and develop their evolving relationship to their community, culture, and world. This can contribute to a sense of agency, as learners take public action through their writing (Kramsch, A`ness, & Lam, 2000; Warschauer, 2000). Authenticity of purpose is critical, with students' souring on Web-based writing that has no real-world objective. As summarized by Warschauer (2000), high student engagement in writing for the Web depends on students' understanding well the purpose of the activity, viewing the purpose as socially and/or culturally

relevant, finding the electronic medium advantageous for fulfilling the purpose, and being encouraged and enabled to use medium appropriate rhetorical features to fulfill the purpose. Lu (1994) found that the struggles of her bilingual students (even in a mainstream composition classroom) challenge on the ways the English orientate to texts. A Chinese student from Malaysia uses the modal “can able to” –a structure that connotes for her “ability from the perspective of the external circumstances”(Lu, 1994: 452). Though the student is aware of the modal can, she finds that this is loaded with a volitionist connotation that is more typical of a western sense of unlimited agency. The student wants to express the need to achieve independence despite community constraints (as it is true of her personal experience of coming to study in the United States despite the family’s view that the place of a woman is inside the house). Her neologism is an attempt to convey a more qualified agency that takes account of community restrictions. Finding that even grammar can be ideological, Lu asks whether we shouldn’t go to the extent of accommodating creative uses of language in our practice of multiculturalism in education.

Closely related to the issue of identity is that of voice. A study by Matsuda (2001) indicated the complex nature of voice in online writing, showing how a Japanese Web-based diarist drew from a wide range of discourse practices – used by video game players, animation fans, and others – in shaping and expressing her online voice. This complexity could present a particular challenge for language learners, whose range of available discursive repertoires in their second language is often limited.

Therefore, the concept of authorship is hanging in new media, with students empowered not only to author texts but also to help rewrite the very rules by which texts are created. They can impose all of their levels of authorship on the outside world through online publishing (Murray, 1997). These new possibilities thus shift the emphasis from authenticity (following native speaker norms, to a later emphasis on authorship (creating texts within structural environments), to new opportunities for agency (Warschauer, 2000). In fact the ability to author texts, together with the authenticity of audience in online communication, creates new possibilities of agency, that is the power to take meaningful action and see the results of one’s own decisions and choices.

In sum, the Internet is rapidly shifting the terrain of writing. Before the Information revolution, writing was viewed as a mechanical correctness and grammaticality, and sometimes a little emphasis put on argumentation, persuasion, and justification skills in English classes. Writing was treated as an orphan child and escaped teachers’ notices. To project your identities, to introduce your own culture, to make friends, to write and publish articles, to develop web sites, to land a suitable job, to join a discussion group, and to publicize your products, you need to know more than basic and mechanistic level of writing. New situations require

that students know how to argue, justify, persuade, and communicate effectively. So grammaticality plays second fiddle to the critical writing.

CONSULUSION

As it has been stated, the new era_ cybercommunication, cybervillage, and globalization_ requires multiliteracies which have opened up a new paradigm for second language learning especially reading and writing instruction in the academy. The pedagogical implications and classroom applications have to be worked out in the future. Generally, English classes are just sites of language learning and no more than that. Activities, tasks, exercises are usually arranged in a way to make students highly proficient in English language. However, the new era demands more than that: critical thinking and interpretation are a must of this age. To engage in the creative and critical process of reading and writing, we have to stop focusing on the basic levels of reading and writing skills. We have to teach our students strategies for critical evaluation and rhetorical negotiation so that they can express their views easily and read and evaluate materials critically.

In a nutshell, language activities must empower learners to take control, to become autonomous, and to become better thinkers and language learners. To this end, second language learning teachers are required to adopt an extensive view towards language learning, transcending the traditional ways of teaching. They are expected to teach both language and thinking. Learners are then engaged in using the target language for a purpose, that is, to develop learners' thinking ability, and through this that their language competence develops.

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