Some Approaches to Literature, Language Teaching and the Internet

Abstract. This article focuses on how the internet can be used to exploit the use of literary texts in the language learning classroom. Drawing on critical theory, it is suggested that hypermedia and fan fiction sites are two resources on the internet that can be used to promote the development of interpretive strategies and language awareness among language learners. Two key pedagogic principles, scaffolding and reflectivity, should inform the design of materials to be used with these resources. Bearing these principles in mind, some possible generic activities are proposed, which can be adapted for use with different groups of learners.

1. The background

In recent decades, a number of different arguments have been advanced for using literary texts to promote the learning of the English language (see for example WIDDOWSON 1975; COLLIE / SLATER 1987; DUFF / MALEY 1990; LAZAR 1993; CARTER / MCRAE 1996; PARKINSON / REID THOMAS 2000). In addition to the more traditional arguments that literary texts provide learners with a unique insight into English-speaking cultures around the world and also help to develop the ‘whole person’, two more specifically linguistic reasons for using literature are often cited. The first of these is that literary texts are uniquely open-ended in that there is no single way of analysing or interpreting such texts. As such, they offer language learners an opportunity to “be active participants and explorers of linguistic and cultural processes [...]” (CARTER 2007: 16). The second reason is that literary texts offer language learners an opportunity to develop their overall language awareness (WIDDOWSON 1975). By asking students to examine literary uses of language, we are developing their capacity to understand the specific meanings conveyed by a grammatical or lexical form in a particular context. This capacity, and the development of more sophisticated interpretive strategies, can then be transferred to other linguistic contexts, ranging from everyday conversations to the reading of academic texts.

Concurrent to the development of these arguments for using literature in language teaching, the last few years have also seen the rapidly increasing global use of the internet. This has been accompanied by a range of contradictory reactions from parents and educators. Does the internet mean that young people no longer read, or does it provide...
different opportunities for developing literacy? Does the internet promote more reading and literary culture through online book groups, websites and discussion boards, or does the online medium discourage the deep concentration required to grapple with a literary text? Is the internet a vast repository of helpful information about literature just a click away, or is it a jumbled mass of data that students find confusing to navigate? Is the internet democratising publishing by allowing many new literary voices to reach a wider audience, or is much of what is published online of poor quality? Does the internet give students access to information, or is it causing increasing amounts of plagiarism in education? Given these complicated questions, it is not surprising that educators often feel a sense of ambivalence towards the use of the internet for teaching purposes. Yet it is also a truism to state that more and more language learners around the world are daily users of the internet, and that many classrooms globally are using the internet to enhance language learning. What then, is the connection between using literary texts to promote the development of interpretive strategies and language awareness, and the use of the internet? Can the internet enable educators to use literary texts effectively to facilitate the learning of a foreign or second language? And taking it even a step further, in classrooms or lecture halls where the internet, or the technical expertise to use it, is not readily available, what lessons can we learn from the internet about using literature to promote language teaching? In order to consider these questions, we will begin by identifying certain key aspects of the internet which are relevant to the use of literary texts in language teaching.

2. Key aspects of the internet

DEREWIANKA (2003) has identified three main types of electronic materials relevant for language teaching. Firstly, there is hypermedia or hypertext, which is the capacity to make links between different ‘bits of information’, through the use of pop-ups within a document, or hyperlinks between one site and another. In other words, hypertext is “[...] composed of blocks of text and the electronic links that join them”, while hypermedia can link “a passage of verbal discourse to images, maps, diagrams and sound” (LANDOW 1992: 4). Secondly, multimedia allows for different forms of media, ranging from still text or graphics to animated text and graphics to sound and video. Hypertext and multimedia are often available to language learners in the form of CD-ROMs or other software, as well as on the internet. Finally, communication media, such as email, discussion boards, listservs, chatrooms and video conferencing, provide the opportunity for participants to actively communicate online with each other. In this paper, hypertext and one particular form of communication media, fan fiction sites, will be considered. Both of these have been of interest to literary theorists, and may therefore be of particular relevance in integrating the use of literary texts into language teaching.
2.1 Hypertext and critical theory

In a seminal work, LANDOW (1992: 3) states that there are many significant “parallels between computer hypertext and critical theory”. He refers to the ideal textuality in Barthes’ *S/Z* in which a text is a “galaxy of signifiers” (BARTHES 1970, quoted in LANDOW 1992: 3), having numerous interconnections and networks between them. According to LANDOW, electronic hypertext promotes this ideal textuality by making individual references easy to follow so that the “entire field of interconnections is obvious and easy to follow” (LANDOW 1992: 4).

In addition, hypertext also blurs the boundaries between reader and writer (ibid.: 5). Each time the reader chooses (or not) to follow a particular hypertextual link, he or she becomes actively engaged in constructing textual meaning. Thus, the reader is not simply a consumer, but a producer of textual meaning. While traditional print media privilege the principle of linear ordering in texts (that is, we generally read a book sequentially turning the pages), hypertext produces “multi-vocal networks of meaning” (BROWNER [et al.] 2000: 170) that demand active text reconstruction by readers. Texts in which a reader can be active and creative are those which BARTHES refers to as “writerly”, rather than “readerly” (BROWNER [et al.] 2000: 170).

2.2 Hypertext and language learning

In the language learning classroom, forms of media that actively involve students in the making of meaning can be seen to be a powerful tool. Nevertheless, from a pedagogic perspective, the use of hypertext can be problematic. Hypertext can be destabilising to novice readers, who may find themselves randomly following a series of links without being able to make meaningful connections between them. In addition, the way students conceptualise the reading of hyperlinks may be at odds with the instructors’ rationale for using hypertext. SMITH (1996), for example, describes a university classroom in which he used LANDOW’s hypertext “The Dickens Web”, which contains a wide variety of information on Dickens and *Great Expectations* with links between different materials. SMITH makes the point that his students treated the Dickens Web as a reference tool, rather than as a pedagogic tool in which they had to play the role of active constructors of knowledge. Thus, they hoped to glean relevant facts from following the hyperlinks, rather than actively working to make explicit the frequently implicit connections between the links.

In the language learning classroom these concerns should be paramount. Our students may not have sufficient proficiency in the language they are learning to be able to process text fairly automatically. Thus, the cognitive demands of fully processing hyperlinks are likely to be considerable. If hypertext enables our students to enter a sophisticated world of textual interconnections, then it also surely increases “our responsibility to teach them how to do this” (SMITH 1996: 125).

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This responsibility is important not only if we are to make use of hypertext for receptive purposes (i.e. when reading), but also if we are to make use of hypertext for productive purposes (i.e. when writing). This would involve our students in the creation of hypertext themselves. For example, if students are able to create their own web pages they can be encouraged to ‘annotate’ a literary text, by inserting links from various points in the text to definitions of a highlighted word or phrase; a visual image; a piece of biographical, historical or cultural information that they believe is relevant to the word or phrase; a piece of relevant critical writing, or simply their own personal interpretation of the meaning or effect of a particular word, grammatical form or literary device used in the text.

If neither computer facilities nor technical expertise are available, then a ‘low-tech’ approximation to the creation of hypertext could be developed in the classroom. Students can be asked to do some detailed research on a particular literary extract, using the internet or libraries if possible, and then create a large wall poster with the text in the middle. Hypertext can be simulated by drawing arrows from the relevant segments of the original text to ‘boxes’ on the poster surrounding the text. These boxes could contain the kinds of annotations and links to historical, cultural and biographical information mentioned previously.

Both the ‘high-tech’ and ‘low-tech’ versions of hypertext encourage the development of interpretive strategies and improved language awareness, since by deciding what hyperlinks to include students have to use the linguistic evidence in the text to include commentary and written, audio or visual information that is both relevant and illuminating.

Nevertheless, it should be recognised that a ‘high-tech’ and ‘low-tech’ version are fundamentally different. As KRAMSCH et al. (2000: 95) point out, an electronic medium “itself imposes its own aesthetic logic on the creation of the material”. KRAMSCH et al. describe a university classroom in which undergraduate students developed a CD-ROM for the teaching of Latin American culture. By responding to the rhetorical structures engendered by the electronic medium, students working on the project began to develop a deepened sense of “how knowledge is represented” (KRAMSCH et al. 2000: 88) and the way in which different media influence this representation. Thus, the representation of knowledge on a classroom wall poster will necessarily be different to that created by electronic hypertext, although developing both will call upon students to use interpretive skills in the creation of annotation and commentary.

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2 For ideas on how to get students developing their own webpages with hyperlinks, please see DUDENEY (2007: 133–135). For lists of websites where students’ work can be published, and where information about making webpages is available, please see DUDENEY (2007: 154). Updates to DUDENEY’s book, as well as other information on using the internet in language teaching, can also be found at: http://www.cambridge.org/elt/chlt/internet (Retrieved 12 February 2008).

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3. Fan Fiction

3.1 Fan Fiction and critical theory

The internet enables users in different parts of the world to communicate online via such tools as email, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, chatrooms, etc. One particular type of communication media, relevant to the teaching of literature, is the fan fiction site. On these sites: “contributors to the site write stories in the style of particular narratives, sometimes additional episodes, sometimes parallel or related stories, often involving the same character as the original” (UNSWORTH 2006: 9).

At times, the sites may demand strict rules governing the relationship of the new fiction to the original source fiction. Fans on sites write stories relating to their favourite books, cartoons, movies, or TV shows, ranging from literature that forms a traditional part of the canon (such as the novels of Jane Austen) to contemporary popular fiction (such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series). Just as hypertext is seen as engaging the reader in writerly, rather than readerly text, so too is fan fiction. Theorists of fan fiction, many of whom write fan fiction themselves, claim that fan fiction invites the reader to “enter, interpret and expand the text” (HELLEKSON / BUSSE 2006: 6). Writers of fan fiction engage with the source text, which they then rework in complex, often subversive ways. The writing practices on fan sites encourage high levels of collaboration, with some writers composing and posting stories, which are often revised and rewritten after commentary and critique from other members of the fan community. Thus, individual authorship shades into collaborative authorship, and the stories become “shared readings, potentially offering other fans new ways to engage with a reoriented canon” (HELLEKSON / BUSSE 2006: 153).

The postings made by writers of fan fiction can be described as the kind of “textual interventions” recommended by POPE (1995) as a way of better understanding a text. POPE argues that the best way for us to understand how a text works is: “[...] to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done” (POPE 1995: 1). This intervention ranges from changing individual words or phrases in the text to recasting the base text in the style of another author (POPE 1995: 192–201). Writers of fan fiction often extend a text before or after the events it represents, write alternative endings to the text or reframe the narrative by telling if from the perspective of another character. These can all be seen as examples of textual intervention that engage the reader’s interpretive strategies and extend his or her linguistic awareness.

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3 For a clear discussion of these different kinds of online tools, please see DUDENEY (2007), Chapter 3.

4 One of the most popular and extensive site is Fan Fiction, which can be found at: www.fanfiction.net (Retrieved 11 February 2008).
3.2 Fan Fiction and language learning

Communication media, such as email, discussion boards, blogs and fan fiction sites can all be seen as encouraging the “collaborative construction of knowledge” (JOCHEMS et al. 2004), or in the case of fan fiction site, the “collaborative construction of fictions”. Reading literature may be seen by some young people as difficult and inaccessible, yet the high level of participation on fan fiction sites suggests that this form of literary output increases an enthusiasm for reading, narrows the distance between a literary work and its readers, and reinvigorates the interpretation of a text. Nevertheless, the use of such sites in the language learning classroom may be slightly problematic, both on a practical and pedagogic level.

First of all, participating confidently in communication media in another language may appear to require a native speaker-like competence in the other language. This could prove off-putting to some learners, unless we provide support in working on the ‘nuts and bolts’ of text construction, such as grammar and vocabulary.

In addition, while the language on the sites may well conform to the norms of standard British or American English, many educators may still feel that it is rather basic compared to the subtle literary effects of great canonical works. If we are teaching canonical literary texts, highly valued for their literary merit, should we be bothering to spend time on popular interpretations of these? Perhaps the answer is that reading these ‘popular’ responses to a work can be a useful way of deepening students’ interest in and enthusiasm for the literary work. It can also help them to reflect on its relevance to contemporary culture. Why, for example, do the novels of Jane Austen still have such a hold on the popular (largely female?) imagination in the United Kingdom, as evidenced by so many postings on fan fiction sites?

A third problem is that some of the material available on fan fiction sites may not be at all suitable for our students, and it is crucial that these sites are carefully vetted by teachers before students are exposed to them.

Finally, educational classrooms are not necessarily the voluntary, self-organising groups such as those found on the internet. For example, many fan fiction sites are formed by voluntary groups of members, sharing a powerful common interest. Unless language learners are genuinely motivated to participate in such groups, the opportunity for authentic communication that they offer may remain unexploited. If we are to use such sites successfully in the classroom, we should therefore try to ensure that students have a choice in terms of which works they engage with as fans, rather than forcing them to engage only with our choices or with set works on the syllabus.

Just as educators have a responsibility to help our students make use of hypertext, so too do we have a responsibility to enable our students to benefit from the use of communication media, such as fan fiction sites. In order to do so, what pedagogic principles need to inform our use of both hypertext and fan fiction sites?
4. The Use of Hypertext and Fan Fiction

4.1 Pedagogic principles

It seems that two pedagogic principles need to be in evidence if language learners are to benefit from the use of hypertext and fan fiction sites in the language-learning classroom. The first is that students cannot be expected to use either of these media unaided. Some kind of scaffolding, in the form of tasks or activities, should be provided to guide and support students, while also giving them space to make their own choices and decisions. This scaffolding should provide them with the tools to cope more effectively with the linguistic density of reading online in a second language.

Secondly, the activities devised should encourage students in critical reflection so that we increase students’ awareness of the specific literacy practices resulting from the use of the online medium. For example, we should encourage students to consider the forms of connection occasioned by hyperlinks, and their possible effects on cognitive processing. We should encourage students to reflect on the kinds of collaborative writing apparent on fan fiction sites and how this might impact on the concept of individual authorship. In other words, our aims should not only be to exploit the internet resources available to use literature more effectively in language teaching, but also to encourage students to think critically about how their use of these resources influences literacy practices. It is hoped that such a pedagogy may go some way to recognising that the use of the internet is inevitable in many educational settings, but that we need to respond to it in critical, self-reflective ways so as to increase its educational potential for using literary texts in the language classroom.

4.2 Some suggested activities

1. READING HYPERTEXT

Aims: To encourage students to reflect on how knowledge construction is influenced by different routes through hyperlinks

Materials: An internet site relating to literature which features many hyperlinks

Activities:

(1) After a source text has been read and studied by students, ask them to spend a set amount of time (for instance an hour) ‘browsing’ the site chosen. They should follow hyperlinks as they choose, but should note down the sequence of links as they move from one to the other. Anything interesting or relevant to the text in each link should also be noted down, using dictionaries to help decode unfamiliar vocabulary if necessary.

(2) Using the notes they have taken while following the hyperlinks, students should prepare a short presentation to their classmates in which they describe any materials they found interesting or relevant.

(3) After the presentations, ask the students what differences in content in the presentations were thrown

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up by different sequences of links. What sorts of links were easiest to follow? Which were harder? How did following the sequence of hyperlinks feel different from reading in print?

2. PREPARATION FOR CONSTRUCTION OF HYPERTEXT

Aims: To encourage students to: a) begin to gather material that can be used to construct hypertext b) reflect on the type of sites revealed by search engines, and what this reveals about the reception of a particular work.

Materials: The internet.

Activities:
Using Google, Yahoo or any other search engine, ask students to conduct a search by inputting the key words for a particular literary work. They should note down some comments in response to these questions:

1. How many entries did your search reveal in total?
2. Looking at the first thirty entries, how many...
   - provided critical literary theory (e.g. by academics at universities)?
   - provided background historical or biographical information?
   - provided a review of the book?
   - related to other versions of the literary texts, e.g. films, comics, TV series?
   - related to commercial sites advertising the sale of the text?
   - related to projects by school children?
   - used the name of the work for a company or service?*
   - provided the opportunity for readers to discuss or write something about the work?

Were there any other kinds of entries you could add to the list above?

Classroom discussion could then focus on what the answers to the questions reveal about the contemporary reception of a particular work. (This activity can also be used before a text is studied in order to stimulate students’ interest in the work.)

Students should also be asked to choose two or three sites to explore in detail, which could help them with information for producing their own hypertext (see Activity 3).

3. CONSTRUCTION OF HYPERTEXT

Aims: To encourage students to use hypertext to annotate a literary text.

Materials: An extract from a literary work studied by the students.

Activities: Ask students, working in groups on order to encourage collaboration, to decide how they will provide hyperlinks to the literary extract. They should think about...

- which words or phrases in the text they might link to dictionary definitions;
- which words or phrases they might link to their own commentary or interpretation;
- which section of the text they might link to historical, biographical or cultural information;
- which section of the text they might link to an image, such as a picture or photo;
- which section of the text they might link to the views of a critic, or to other relevant websites.

Once the students have constructed their hypertext, encourage other students to critique and discuss it.

4. READING OF FAN FICTION

Aims: To encourage students to explore alternative responses to a source text.

Materials: Fan fiction sites, such as www.fanfiction.net.

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* A Google search of the phrase ‘Great Expectations’, for example, on 8 February 2008 revealed a website advertising a shop for expectant parents and their babies, a dating agency and a company advertising holiday villas. What does this reveal about the way the title of Dickens’ book has crept into everyday linguistic usage and its resonance for native speakers of English?
Activities:
(1) After students have studied a text in the classroom, get them to read a number of responses by fans to
the work. They should use dictionaries to help them decode any unfamiliar vocabulary.
(2) Ask students to then summarise the story they have read, and to comment on whether they liked it or
not. What do they think about its relationship to the original source text? What kind of critique or
compliment would they offer its author? Are these the same as or different from postings by other
fans?

5. Writing of Fan Fiction

Aims: To encourage students to write their own ‘fan story’ as an alternative to a source text.
Activities: Fan fiction sites, such as www.fanfiction.net.
(1) Ask students to write an ‘alternative’ text to the one they have studied in the classroom, or (if
possible) a text they know and like. This could involve telling part of the narrative from an alternative
point of view, changing the ending, moving the story to a different time or place, etc.
(2) Encourage students working in groups to critique the grammar and vocabulary of each other’s
versions before posting them up on a fan site.
(3) Discuss responses to the posting with students, and help them with the grammar and vocabulary
required for making any further changes to their story, or in responding to comments.
(4) Discuss how they experienced the process of writing and receiving feedback, e.g. was it threatening
or energising? Was it different from or the same as other forms of writing they have to do? At the
end, how much do they feel that they ‘owned’ their story themselves, and how much did it feel part
of a collaborative writing process? How do they feel about this?

5. Future developments

There are many other ways of using the internet to integrate literature teaching into the
language learning classroom, and these are likely to develop in the future. As computer-
mediated communication (CMC) becomes more widespread in education, the use of web
platforms (such as WebCT and Blackboard) will enable learners across the world to ‘talk’
online to each other about literary texts which they have studied. Open-access online
discussion groups will continue to provide learners (and their teachers) with an opportu-
nity to discuss literary texts, free of the constraints of the face-to-face classroom. The
searchability of the internet will allow for the possibility of “more scientific approaches
to text” through the use of concordancing tools (BROWNER [et al.] 2000: 4). Such tools
can form the basis for many different classroom activities, enabling students to conduct
in-depth linguistic analysis of literary texts. But, as with the use of hypertext and fan
fiction sites in the classroom, a critical pedagogy needs to be adopted so that the internet
can be harnessed to promote the development of interpretive strategies and linguistic
awareness among language learners.

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See, for example, the wealth of materials and opportunities available for online discussion at the British
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