THE WEB, CONCORDANCE, AND VIRTUAL REALITY IN STUDYING LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper focuses on three modern technological tools and examines their use in the teaching and learning of literary and cultural studies. The Web's rich resources and information, the concordance's astounding potential in stylistic and linguistic research, and Virtual Reality's motivating and appealing effect, all contribute to providing literature students with a new perspective of stories, the ability to observe things in a different way, and maintain their interest in literature like never before.

Introduction

> *So you may ask what is the use of studying the world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good.*
> (Frye, 1964, p. 77)

Porter (1999) proves that, while the general perception in higher education is that technology has little to contribute to the study of literature, "technology *can* make a contribution to the teaching of literary and cultural studies, given sufficient time and resources." Although the arguments against incorporating literature in ELT have been convincingly made (Brumfit, 1983; Widdowson, 1984), the equally convincing arguments in favor of using it outnumber them (Brumfit and Carter, 1986; Gajdusek, 1988; Lazar, 1993; Marckwardt, 1978; Marquardt, 1967; Marshall, 1979; McKay, 1982; Oster, 1985; Povey, 1972, 1979; Rosenblatt, 1970; Short, 1989; Spack, 1985; Widdowson, 1984). In brief, what most of these authors agree upon is that, in spite of the complex and sometimes obscure use of language in literary works, which can be a language learning hindering factor (for an intriguing - and rather amusing - address of the subject, see Widdowson, 1984: 160-173), using literature in the ESL class has important "pedagogic, linguistic, humanistic, and cultural" benefits (Oster, 1989: 89) in the following respects:

- · it provides valuable authentic language input (Lazar, 1993);
- · it expands language awareness and enhances (imaginative/creative) writing and reading skills;
- · it "enlarges students' vision and fosters critical thinking" (Oster, 1989: 85);
- · teaches culture;
- · helps seeing one's own lack of cultural understanding when comparing literary interpretations with others (Brumfit and Carter, 1986; Maley, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1970);
- · "educates the whole person" (Lazar, 1993: 19).

There are various methods of teaching literature and various resource books and guides for teachers which suggest them. As Collie and Slater (1987: 7-8) correctly point out, although language teaching has, in recent years, become guided by communicative approaches, when it comes to introducing literature in the EFL classroom, "this communicative ideal too often vanishes." Observational studies have proved that teacher talk dominates the classroom when teaching literature, thus distancing the learners from their own response and "causing them to undervalue it" (Collie and Slater, 1987: 8). The questions a tutor might ask in order to challenge the learners' response, are often not so open-ended, again resulting in creating very little room for the learners' development of their own opinions.

Although these teacher-centred approaches may be successful in making the students familiar with the literary work, they fail to encourage students to explore the texts alone and make them their own. As I aim to show in this paper, apart from diving into piles of books on criticism, the Web, concordance, and Virtual Reality can prove highly challenging means of exploring texts and forming one's own response.

The Web

More than a decade ago, Philips (1987: 176) argued that compared to language teaching, literature teaching with computers had not attracted much attention and pointed out ways in which literature can be 'manipulated' with computers. With the evolution of the Internet nowadays, the increase in the number of computer users, and applications like concordancers, literature teaching and learning has earned its place in Computer-Assisted Learning: an increasing number of services, particularly electronic texts, are available on the Web to humanities scholars (Lunsford, 1995: 297). As Danahay puts it (1997: 277), the amount of material available for the teaching of Victorian literature, in particular, has been increasing expotentially and in his own teaching he has gradually increased the amount of time spent online "to the point where [his] current Victorian course is taught 50% online". Danahay is but one of great many teachers to implement the Web in their courses; Boulter (2000), for example, has also used Web materials to supplement his tutorials in Critical Theory.

The Internet exhibits various attempts of people at times to create series of webpages by which to provide guidance and material for literary study. Some only differ from existing printed study guides in that they are provided free of charge, while others do offer considerably more and/or intriguing material. This section looks at some of the most representational appearances of such attempts on the Web and discusses their usefulness, as well as where they may fall short:

The Victorian Web (http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/victov.html)

Created by Landow in 1987 as part of 'a large multi-million dollar hypertext project' (Landow, 2000, personal communication), to be followed by the commercially available *The Dickens Web* three years later, *The Victorian Web* is considered today as one of the most significant literary resources on the Net. Recommended by various big organizations such as the BBC, NEH, the French and Irish Ministries of Education, and receiving millions of hits per month, *The Victorian Web* is an elaborate website consisting of about nine thousand documents, almost a dozen books, parts of other books, and other contributions from all over the world. To quote Danahay, it is "an impressive online resource containing literary, biographical, historical, and social information on a wide range of Victorian authors" (Danahay, 1997: 279). A criticism that could be made of *The Victorian Web* is that it is not interactive; it is a collection of static pages providing raw texts (however rich and impressive) but the users cannot interact with any of the information.

Literature Online (http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/)

Literature Online is a massive database of English and American literature launched in 1996 which requires annual subscription to be accessed. It is one of the largest commercial websites yet established and, according to Hall (1998: 298), "is highly innovative in its approach to bringing together existing and newly-created full-text databases, reference works and web resources." It gives access to more than 260,000 works of poetry, prose, and drama, covering a time span of fourteen centuries. In addition, it includes a dictionary and a master index of websites related to English literature, along with extensive biographical and bibliographical information and search facilities. Undoubtedly, *Literature Online* can prove extremely useful to researchers and university students, as they are provided with a rich source of information and links to further resources. Although, for me, its major shortcoming is its commerciality, *Literature Online* does provide two valuable free services: one is *Lionheart*, a database of a thousand love poems attracting up to 50,000 users per day in its first two weeks (Hall, 1998: 297), and the other is *Writer-in-Residence*, which has a different author running online tutorials and giving advice in reading and writing poetry for six months. In additon, noticeboards are available for users to comment and discuss on the issues raised.

PinkMonkey.com (http://www.pinkmonkey.com)

Purporting to be America's premier online study site, *PinkMonkey.com* is a Texas-based free site which offers notes and study materials for literature and other subjects, aiming to help students with their homework. Their 'MonkeyNotes' and 'Barron's Booknotes' consist of hundreds of literature titles, each featuring summaries, themes, characters, criticism, and the original text.

Although *PinkMonkey.com* is a free service, it still requires the user to have a membership. It is totally supported by advertising, which is more than blatant on the site: it is packed with advertisements and pop-up windows asking the user to pay their sponsors a visit, for *PinkMonkey.com* to 'survive and continue to provide you with the ever-expanding library of quality resources you need'. What is more, despite the company stating in the FAQ that 'If you steal from us, we will find you and it will cost you. Our success rate is 100%. Don't do it', they admit elsewhere on the site that students are tempted to copy and paste the material in their homework and it is feared that they very often opt for this easy way.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (http://www.saikk.net/doriangray)

This series of webpages has been specifically created as part of the present author's MSc CALL project, in an attempt to incorporate the aforementioned websites' positive features while excluding any shortcomings. It provides the visitor with the full text, the author's biographical information, the social and historical context of the work, questions and notes to trigger individual responses. Meanwhile, to deter users from copying and pasting material from the site, two DHTML features have been used to work against thieving: disabling the mouse's right click function, the one which normally brings up the menu with the cut, copy, and paste options, and 'tooltips', which are pop-up boxes loaded with information and appear only when the cursor is held over a certain term or word; moving the cursor away from the word causes the tooltip to vanish so the user cannot touch the text inside. However, the major innovation of the website is the provision of a full-word concordance of the text, allowing the user to closely examine the use of each and every word in the text, its context, collocations, frequency, and so forth.

The concordance

Characterised as emancipatory applications (Kemmis, 1977, in Higgins and Johns, 1984) the concordances, such as Tim Johns' MicroConcord and Higgins' Findword, form an important aspect of CALL and CBL in general. They are computer-based programs which treat a string of characters as input to then provide us with a list of that string's occurrences in a pre-specified corpus. This output involves displaying the defined string of characters (e.g. word or phrase) within its surrounding context, as found in the corpus of texts, and the capability of the user to isolate these instances, save them, sort them, examine them more closely, and so forth. Concordances can prove very useful for investigating word frequencies - which have determined

the contents of the much-celebrated Cobuild course (Willis, 1990) - word associations, certain morphological characteristics, and even the grammatical class of the words (Biber et al., 1998: 254), thus making an essential tool for linguists, lexicographers, grammarians, and other language specialists.

With the birth of stylistics literary studies have become more focused on linguistics and drifted away from plain aesthetic appreciation. Corpora and concordances can be used for a range of purposes; in ELT, translation, stylistics, literary linguistics, the study of 'literary language' (for an argument on whether there is such a thing as literary language, see Brumfit and Carter, 1986: 2-10). Knowles and Malmkjær (1996) utilise the concordancer to realise some very intriguing ideas concerning literature teaching, especially of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales (1996: 189-202). In this case, the concordancer is used for text analysis and language use in literary works. What I personally find highly intriguing, however demanding, is to have the learners carry out certain tasks using the concordancer and relevant texts: they, alone, are to search for words and, alone, decide on their usage, with the teacher being just an inspector and supervisor. What Knowles and Malmkjær (1996) suggest is that examining concordance lines from an author's work allows us to discern his/her writing style, imagery, symbolism, and so forth. For example, learners can carry out concordances on several Oscar Wilde stories, for any words they should deem appropriate, in order to gather information about Wilde's usage of precious stones and metals. Ideally, they could search for words or groups of words, such as *ruby*, *amber*, *porphyry*, *gold*, *silver*, *sapphire*, and so on, and even note their collocations (e.g. *red rubies*, *bright porphyry*, *fine pearls*, *tissued gold*, etc.). Knowles and Malmkjær already provide us with such processed data, but this does not mean that it would not be fascinating for the learners to do it themselves: categorize the various uses of these words and recognise the significance laid on them.

Virtual Reality
Though considered a cutting-edge technology by most, Virtual Reality has been enabling literature students at Haywood Community College in North Carolina (http://potemkin.haywood.cc.nc.us/hitec/vr) to become immersed in the stories they read since 1994. Virtual Reality is the technology which allows its users to dive into a computer-generated virtual world. In other words, virtual world systems are the most sophisticated integrated educational environments, embedding all course material as objects within a physical space simulation that class participants navigate within. After reading Flannery O'Conner's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the students at HCC 'donned a head-mounted display and stepped into a virtual world based on the final scene of the story' (http://potemkin.haywood.cc.nc.us/hitec/vr/page2.html). There they found the "tall, dark, and deep" woods; the ill-fated car; the Misfit's glasses; the grandmother's basket; the cat that caused the accident; the newspaper with the Misfit's picture on the front page, along with some misleading items that were strewn around the scene'. Their simple yet fascinating task was to

walk around, observe the surroundings, and identify the elements of the virtual world that did not appear in the story (a task betraying any who haven't read it!). More substantial assignments include students creating their own worlds based on their understanding of the stories and then presenting them to their classmates, assuming the roles of instructor and co-creator of the work, roles similar to a director or producer of a film. In giving these presentations, students will have had to analyze a story's significant elements: setting, characters, tone and mood, images and symbols, point-of-view. In working closely with a literary text, they will gain a new appreciation of how writers use words, images, and setting to set a story's tone and mood and to underscore the story's theme. But most importantly, they will become engaged with a literary work on a level none of them have done before.

For the most part, the students reacted enthusiastically, and talked about gaining a new perspective and better understanding of the story. The results of this initial 'experiment' were so good, with the students being more motivated than ever, that an entire class was developed and taught blending literature with virtual reality, appropriately named 'Exploring Literature Through Virtual Reality'.

Conclusion

As is the case with most newly-introduced CALL and technological tools, the concordancer and Virtual Reality in the classroom carry implications about the teacher's role in it. These implications are whether the teacher would be rendered obsolete or, on the contrary, be assigned a harder task. Working with concordance on the materials for *should*, Johns (1991) had come up with over 800 citations; leaving the task of concordancing to the students "might have produced some interesting results, but would also have been a task of considerable difficulty: it might make the work more manageable if [he] sorted the data into some basic categories in advance" (Johns, 1991: 6). In this light, the teacher would be far from obsolete, as he/she would put considerable effort in preparing the materials. When it comes to literary and cultural studies, however, be it with concordance or VR, the load on the students' shoulders can be heavier, should the educator decide to let the learners "act as researchers" (Wichman et al., 1997: 83).

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