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Teacher **E**ducation and **A**ppplied
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María ALCANTUD-DÍAZ

“Fighting the Myths and
Misconceptions on Evil Stepmothers:
Long Life Learning by Means of
Digital Storytelling”

| pp. 1-18

Joe PEREIRA

“Video Game Meets Literature:
Language Learning with Interactive
Fiction”

| pp. 19-45

Deolinda SIMÕES

Helga GUINCHO

Isabel MAGALHÃES

“Teaching Languages to European
Computer Science Students in an
Engineering Institute in Portugal:
Translations Approaches in the
English, German and French
Classroom”

| pp. 46-70

Lili CAVALHEIRO

“Language and Teaching Materials
in ELT: An EIL Approach”

| pp. 71-84

Pedro QUERIDO

“A Theoretical Matrix to Approach
Literary Texts in the Foreign
Language Classroom”

| pp. 85-103

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Fighting the Myths and Misconceptions on Evil Stepmothers: Long Life Learning by Means of Digital Storytelling¹

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| University of Valencia

Abstract | One of the foremost goals of the European Framework of Reference for Language Teaching is the development of professional competences, which requires substantial modifications in the teaching and learning process, even as early as primary and secondary school. The motivation for the conception of this article is to display a report of strategies derived from an innovative use of Digital Storytelling. Namely, it is suggested here a new use of children's classic tales in combination with Digital Storytelling as a tool for learning both about language and about life. I will show how Digital Storytelling can help children to be aware of the old values included in the tales and how to bring them up to date. Moreover, this activity could help them to deal with NICTs concerning the five basic competences: listening, writing, reading, speaking and communicating. These are directly involved with the professional world, among other competences related to integrative social traits, for instance, gender equalities and inequalities, and new family structures including the modern role of step-mothers.

After some tentative pilot experiences with Digital Storytelling with primary children, I may draw the following conclusions: firstly, that digital storytelling can help and motivate students to carry out their group tasks in primary and secondary education since children are allowed to use a computer and thus achieving positive appraisal in professional competences. Additionally, this activity, which has merged Digital Storytelling, critical thinking and literature, has proved to be a good reason to be given to parents as to why computers could be used for something more constructive than simply playing computer games. In other words, students have learnt by doing.

Key words | Digital Storytelling, critical thinking, Education for Development, literature for children, NICTs, project work, professional competences

1. Introduction

The present article is based on the concept of 'active learning' by means of Digital Storytelling, a methodology which could involve a change in the students' attitude and role in their learning process due to the fact that: they become active subjects instead of passive ones because the digital story locates the students in the epicenter of the learning process. In addition, Digital Storytelling makes the learning of cross curricular competences easier: group work, written and spoken communication, autonomous learning and project work from primary and secondary school.

We, educators and parents, try to instruct our offspring by advising them about what they should or should not do according to our childhood experiences which we transform into "stories that really are instruction disguised as reminiscence" (Luckens 138). But it stands to reason that if we keep giving them the same kind of teaching, even though we mean well, they might become indifferent to our attempt to educate them. In my opinion, we do not really realise that a growing awareness of what is right and what is wrong may sometimes be drawn from a textbook, a film, or even a tale.

This article suggests a new use of children's classic tales in combination with Digital Storytelling as a tool for learning both about language and about life. Digi-tales (another term used for Digital Storytelling) have been used for many different purposes. This paper explores a selection of attractive and alternative-to-traditional approaches to reading comprehension techniques, by implementing some of the characteristic elements of Digital Storytelling: e.g. interviews, drawing and variation of voice-quality and tone. The purpose is to illustrate how these activities, in particular the use of Digital Storytelling, may motivate them to learn and improve pronunciation, storytelling techniques and critical thinking while creating an alternative multimodal version of the tale they have read. Using tales such as those from the Grimm brothers' fairy tales collection; for instance, *Snow-White*, *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Rapunzel* (Grimm and Grimm [1857]) can help develop the educational, social and practical dimensions embedded in some of the key competences for lifelong learning suggested by the European

Union. I am talking particularly about the interpersonal, professional, intercultural and social competences as well as the civic competence, at the same time as learning a foreign language. Thus, what is depicted in the present article is the use of Digital Storytelling as a very positive and constructive tool since one of its advantages is that it is a first person narrative and thus it can make children aware of the old values included in the tales and how to contextualize them within their more updated social environment.

To sum up, this activity can help to deal with NICTs concerning the four basic competences: listening, writing, reading and speaking and, furthermore, some competences related to integrative social traits, for instance, gender equalities and new family structures, to mention but a few.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Digital Storytelling

Storytelling is traditionally referred to as the retelling of a story. According to Farmer, “[s]torytelling is a personal and direct way to share literature and folk wisdom, and it helps children develop listening and comprehension skills” (155-156).

Nevertheless, in this age of digital native offspring, which seems to push books made of paper, and therefore reading, into the background, technology can play a noteworthy role in fostering the love for literature amongst children adding, at the same time, a professional trait to their lifelong learning. They currently have the chance to use new technologies of information and communication (NTICs) not only to come across those traditional tales derived from oral tradition such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella* or *Rapunzel* which have been passed on from parents to children, but to create and share their own narratives by the use of Digital Storytelling. In my opinion, working with literature in combination with Digital Storytelling in class could offer learners the opportunity to acquire new contextualized vocabulary to promote their creativity and to use their imagination in addition to facing new challenges concerning the understanding of the text.

Moreover, a digital story is an example of a multimodal text that engage the learners' senses in a wide range of ways: "written text and images affect [their] visual sense; spoken language, music and sound affect the hearing sense; images and music affect [their] feelings, separately and in combination (Jamissen and Skou 4). When using Digital Storytelling in class, it is not only the peers taking part in the process that are motivated and willing to learn the language so as to be able to produce a digital story, but the audience too.

Some studies have demonstrated the benefits of using Digital Storytelling to encourage a critical socio-educational focus not only in primary education but also in secondary education (Gregori-Signes and Pennock 2012). The results indicated that the students developed a certain awareness of the issue chosen for their story (e.g. violence, racism, war) since the final product conveys a critical perspective on the topic itself.

2.1.1. Digital Storytelling and the professional competence

Digital Storytelling has opened an innovative window to the art of telling tales since it provides a particularly satisfying and motivational marriage of voice, sound, images, multimedia tools and the traditional storytelling art (Lambert 1997-2010). Furthermore, as Burgess argues, Digital Storytelling can be referred to as "the specific modes of production, technological apparatus and textual characteristics of the community media movement" (207).

A concise definition of Digital Storytelling drawn by summarizing many authors (Lambert 2010, Robin 2005-2008, Barrett 2004-2006) is that it is between a 2-and-5-minute short story or narrative which combines traditional ways of telling a story (spoken and written) with a wide range of multimedia tools such as audio, video or publishing on the internet, to mention but a few. As seen, economy is a core principle of this genre,

using scripts of around 250 words which are then recorded as voiceovers, and a dozen images, usually brought from home. These elements are then combined in a video editing application to produce a digital video that is of sufficient technical quality for web streaming, broadcast, or DVD distribution. (Burgess 207)

Digital Storytelling is workshop-based process in which the assistants can create their own first-person digital story that can be uploaded onto the web. As Burgess explains, Digital Storytelling is not solely a media form, but a “worthwhile contribution to public culture” (207).

The pedagogical applications of technology such as Digital Storytelling to achieve professional skills is out of discussion since students become technologically enhanced, which narrows the boundaries between the amateur and the professional world. In other words, Digital Storytelling is a technological learning process rooted within the framework of authentic professional skills development.

2.1.2. *The first person point of view*

There is one characteristic which makes Digital Storytelling particularly interesting for literature teaching; the personal point of view. Point of view has, according to Lukens a particular meaning for literature since “as we read a story, we may be aware that we are seeing the events through the eyes – and mind – of one of the characters. Or we may have the sensation that we are unbiased eyewitnesses watching the events take place right in front of our eyes” (169). In others words, as Lukens elucidates, “in the first person point of view, the reader/teller lives, acts, feels and thinks the conflict as the protagonist experiences and tells it” (170).

In a digital story, children could either choose to be the first person protagonist or any of the minor characters and retell the story from their point of view, updated, according to what they are going through in their daily lives.

2.1.3. *Cross curricular tool*

Digital Storytelling could also work as a cross curricular tool because its script, either a new version of folk tales as shown in the present article or any just-created story, can contain aspects of other disciplines studied at primary and secondary schools, apart from literature. For instance, as Farmer conveys:

children can create a story about the American Revolution based on what they know about those times. They can tell the life story of an animal based on the knowledge they have or the research they have conducted on that animal's habitat, behavior, and life span. They can also construct a maths story to demonstrate their understanding of shapes or fractions, for instance. For students to succeed in this endeavour, they must know their facts, make decisions about the key elements, and shape those within the parameters of telling a story. Such work involves high-level information literacy, critical thinking and creativity; the result is an original and authentic product of the child's knowledge and imagination. (Farmer 156-157)

2.1.4. The gift of a voice

Lukens explains that "in any composite of verbal and pictorial storytelling, the pictures content appears all at once, but the verbal story is revealed a little at a time in linear progression" (40). For this reason, Digital Storytelling is a very complete tool since it is composed not just by images, but by the presence of a voice, the author's voice.

2.2. Literature from oral tradition aimed at children

When the 18th century arrived, books aimed at children became more child-oriented in their tone, language and subject matter than they had been in previous centuries (Alcantud-Díaz 43). While death and damnation were still important concerns, so too were more ordinary issues related to family life. Nonetheless, it was later, in the 19th century, that children's literature started gaining some significance, as a result of technological developments and commercial supply, amongst other changes, which made books more accessible for everyone (Zipes, *Sticks and Stones* 46). Accordingly, a reading public composed mostly by the rising middle class that fostered universal education sprung up and appropriated traditional folk tales, as Zipes explains (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 14-15), thus spreading the seeds of what we currently know as literature for children.

It was in the shelter of this setting where the Grimm brothers started to publish their collection of tales. The Grimm brothers gathered the tales that belonged to their *Kinder-und*

Hausmärchen (*Fairy Tales for Children and Home*, 1812 to 1857) with the intention of turning them into the expression of the perpetuation of the German culture.

However, occasionally, folk tales were rewritten to include didactic content for children so that they would not be hurt by the violence, crudeness and fantastic exaggeration of the originals. At other times, these tales became trivial, and new fairy tales were written to amuse and distract audiences and make money. Moreover, plays, ballets and operas such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* which drew upon folk tales came into fashion, particularly at the end of the 19th century (Ashliman 169).

The tales which come from oral tradition such as those collected by the Grimms have been referred to in many different ways: the “spiritual history” of humanity or “the cement of society” that brings many cultures together (Lukens 23). Their ‘didacticism’, which can be found in textbooks too, has gone from generation to generation surviving many different ages, political affairs and the modernization of our society. As Lukens depicts, “some literature gives a great deal of information without letting it take over from suspenseful and exciting plot, or from well-developed characters” (139). Some tales will show us different periods of the history of humanity, different countries, different people, different behaviours, but they will also portray social inequalities (related to gender, physical disabilities or wealth). This is one of the traits which has caught my attention most about the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales collection (given that they are considered to be one of the benchmarks of worldwide literature), the violent acts embedded in them, how Cinderella was ill-treated, the way in which Rapunzel was kidnapped by the witch and locked in a high tower, how Little Snow White had to escape from an awful and shocking death up to three times, or how poor Hansel and Gretel were abandoned by their parents and almost eaten by a cannibal witch. This aspect of folk tales, the way in which they are an interesting scaffold for critical thinking activities, is what has been successfully developed with children since, according to Lukens, literature “does not teach; helps us understand” (139).

2.3. Critical thinking

The rise in the presence of critical thinking in the classroom is the evidence which shows to what point educators are aware of the fact that the children that they are instructing today are our societies' future (Vallone 78) since critical foundations are, according to Rafi, "universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth and fairness" (64).

Moreover, critical thinking involves "reflecting on what is known and how that knowledge is justified" (Kuhn 23) and thus children will become aware of what they think and can explain why.

In my opinion, critical thinking and literature may be an interesting marriage due to the fact that literature can be a very flexible instrument for second language teachers since "it can engage the class in aspects of critical thinking that text books rarely do and open minds onto the world" (O'Connell). In fact, this is one of the main objectives of the present article, to foster the use of literary texts, namely tales from oral tradition collected by the Grimm brothers, as an interesting and motivating tool to carry out critical thinking activities. By doing this we would be promoting the right attitudes and values, regarding, for instance, gender equality or the role of some of the characters like step-mothers.

3. Changing the Story: Method

Despite the fact that this article is mostly a report of strategies regarding the use of Digital Storytelling in the way previously depicted, some tentative pilot experiences have been carried out with a group of 15 7-to-8-year-old primary children in order to provide a solid reasoning to the present article. Thus, I proposed some children studying at Public School Padre Tomás de Montañana in Valencia (Spain) to help me with this proposal by participating in the activity with ideas regarding, for example the scripts and by creating themselves a digital story.² I had just one experimental session with them but it was, in my opinion, enough to support and adjust the

steps of the proposal. Additionally, we were able to create a sample digital story in English, a new story about Cinderella's stepmother.

Using Digital Storytelling as an educational tool entails one adult acting as scaffolding in the learning process. This reasoning is based firstly on Vygotsky's theories (1962, 1978) supporting the children learning theory within a social context, that is, a learning process sustained by adults and, secondly, on Bruner (1990) and his scaffolding theory.

The figure of the step-mother is a good example to start with when using Digital Storytelling in order to foster critical thinking. One of the messages that the Grimm's fairy tales conveys to its readers with regard to the family structure does not suit the current concept of family. The step-mother is a good case in point; when children are asked to describe this role, they always describe her in terms of a mean, wicked and envious person that always ill-treats her step-children (Alcantud-Díaz 368). These are precisely the traits of the step-mothers found in the Grimm brothers' fairy tales collection.

Well known examples include: (i) the queen step-mother that tries to kill *Snow White* several times as well as abandoning her in the forest; (ii) the wicked step-mother in *Cinderella* who did her every inconceivable injury; (iii) Mother Holle who forces her step-daughter to do all the hard work in the house and seriously mistreats her; and (iv) the step-mother in the *Juniper Tree* who cuts her step-son's head off, tears him into pieces, cooks a pudding using his meat and gives it to his father for dinner (Alcantud-Díaz 345). Any of the previously mentioned tales could be used to make children think and change the concept they have about steps-mothers.

Children could change the story; the traditional one containing unpleasant details regarding social and gender inequalities could be turned into an updated version which takes into account, for instance, the new family structures (step-mothers and step-fathers, two men, two women; a single man or single woman).

To achieve this objective, I followed Vallone's "fourfold procedure of selecting, preparing, discussing and following up . . . as well as a brief traditional critical thinking discussion adapted to 10-to-12-year old learners (Vallone 78).

3.1. Selecting

Thus, the first thing to be done was to choose one of the tales. I decided to focus on Cinderella as it is an easy-to-dramatise tale. Additionally, the characters' behaviour might be changed without changing the whole plot of the tale.

3.2. Preparing

Once the tale had been selected I could make the most of the previous knowledge of the tale that children tend to have in the sense that they are so familiar with the plot that it does not really matter whether or not the tale is read in English, in terms of their listening comprehension. Hence, I read the tale once showing the images of an electronic book³ or, alternatively, flash cards to the children; there are also some very useful web pages on the internet that can be used to create your own flashcards.⁴ Picture books are an interesting starting point as well as a common pedagogical tool in many primary classrooms, namely those focused on critical thinking activities based on literature since, as Pantaleo conveys,

often, children are asked to create visual texts after picture book read-aloud sessions. In the study conducted by Arizpe and Styles (2003), the participants drew pictures in response to the three selections of children's literature. The researchers examined the literal understanding, overall effect, and internal structure of the children's drawings, and concluded that the children's drawings demonstrated "that even the youngest children can interpret, comprehend and communicate the visual-far beyond what they might be assumed to know" (2003: 138). Arizpe and Styles believe that the children developed "deeper understanding[s] through their visual explorations" (2003: 138).

Thus, visual images make them think beyond what is simply written or heard; visual images make them 'switch their brains on' and start thinking by themselves.

3.3. Discussing

Having read the story aloud, some questions needed to be formulated so as to prepare the discussion. The aim at this stage was to encourage the children to draw upon their experiences,

that is to say, questions such as: who is Cinderella? Is the step-mother mean/wicked/bad? Who is this? (pointing to the prince).

Depending on how competent the students were in English the questions had to be easier or more difficult to understand and could lead them to more or less in-depth answers. The questions at the very beginning were kept very general (description of characters, their clothes, what kind of animals there are and so on). Afterwards, I led them to look for situations which were right and wrong, also by means of questions.

As Vallone depicts, “the important thing is not to impose any particular orientation or theory on the children” (79) but to make possible for them to see how what they have derived from their opinion could be applied to their own behaviour and life.

3.4. Following up

To start with, some decisions were to be made. The first thing to be determined is the kind of Digital Storytelling activity which was going to be carried out in class: a class task, a group task, a drama activity in order to make a new version of the tale at stake, an interviewing activity with the characters of the selected tale so they could tell the story from their personal point of view, and so on. In my opinion, this kind of activity is very useful in working on collaborative competencies and, thus, I always propose that it takes place in groups.

At this stage children had started to make up their minds about the different moral issues found in the tale. Hence, their next step was to transfer their opinion to a digital story script in which rights, the equality between men and women and values, would be present. This script did not necessarily have to be a new version of Cinderella. I offered them the possibility of writing either an interview, or to change, enlarge or include something in the original tale by means of a more rights and equality-based version.

This re-telling of the story was based upon what is known as *parallel storytelling* “used to describe a child’s work if the text and the drawings told the same story simultaneously” (Agosto 267; Pantaleo), but in this case, with changes they thought might be necessary in order to

update Cinderella. To sum up, this was about telling us the same information but “in different forms of communication” (Nikolajeva and Scott 225), from visual and listening to visual and spoken.

4. Result: A Digital Story

Once the learners had been invited to step into the victim or the villain’s shoes (Cinderella, her father, her step-mother, and/or her step-sister), hands on!

Given that this activity has a salient cross-curricular component, computer classes at school might be used to this end. To be precise, all the steps which are going to be depicted next: how to look for sound and images, how to store the raw materials, and so on, might be utilised in an IT class. Likewise, art lessons can be the source of images for their digital story, and music lessons the source of sound and tunes. Religion, or the alternative subject, citizenship might be the place to discuss the concepts of equality, what is right or wrong in relationships with parents, step-parents and other relatives, in their mother tongue. Moreover, some other subjects can contribute to their digital story projects in one way or another.

Furthermore, another trait which I like about dealing with Digital Storytelling with primary children is that we can decide to construct an activity which links family and school. In other words, parents can participate by revising their scripts together while considering what is right and wrong. In addition, parents can help them with their searches of images, audio and so on; material that they can bring into school on a pen drive.

In order to start working with Digital Storytelling, some instruction is needed to train children so as to familiarise them with this tool and, thus, scaffold their learning. I started by showing them the software to be used in the activity, Photo Story 3, a user-friendly and easily downloadable program that is free and, thus, available to everyone. Then, the children had to open different folders on their desktop or pen drives in order to organise their projects.

4.1. Looking for audio and images

Once their scripts were written, I recommended that they make up their own storyboards so as to know exactly what kind of images or tunes were needed. The objective of the storyboard was twofold: firstly, to put them in the shoes of a real film director since that is the position that I suggested they work from, because after several Digital Storytelling projects with primary learners, I have realised that this sort of role play motivates and encourages them a lot. The second objective was to teach them to be organized when having to deal with project work.

There are many copyright-free websites where images, music and sound can be found.⁵ Having copyright-free material is important if you want to upload the final products of the digital stories to a blog or web page.

Once all the material had been gathered, the creation of the digital story was easy. The children had to follow the windows on the program (Photo Story 3) to, firstly, import the images in order, write something on them, add some transition and zoom effects, add the audio and, what I find the essential part, add their voices.

5. Conclusion

The use of Digital Storytelling has been proven to be a very positive and constructive tool since one of its advantages is that it is a first person narrative and, thus, it can make children aware of the old values included in the tales and how to bring them up to date.

Likewise, the script, that is the new story, is the core part of this digital story, critical thinking activity, not the technology that has been used to create it as Porter explains:

A story should be remembered for its soul, not the bells and whistles. If you don't have a good or powerful story, script, and storyboard, then there will never be enough decorating that technology can do to cover it up. On the other hand, demonstrating exemplar craftsmanship with mixing the technical elements in artful ways to unfold your story creates compelling, insightful, original and memorable pieces of communication. The richness of a good story can be diluted when technical elements are over used, distracting, or just plain annoying.

As mentioned previously, I carried out, in an experimental way, this activity with a reduced group of 15 voluntary primary children (7 to 8 years old) studying at Padre Tomás de Montañana public school in Valencia, Spain, so as to gather more accurate data for the present article. One of the problems faced during this activity with them was that even though the children were encouraged to take a very active role in the construction of meaning during the read-aloud session, I found it difficult to engage them in finding the first step into the critical thinking world. It was initially difficult to get them to answer questions about the original tale in the first reading-session. Nevertheless, once some of the most able learners started to provide their opinion, the door to the rest of the class was opened wide.

In short, when children are allowed to use a computer in order to step into literature, they face “all of the storytelling media of the past rolled into one. . . . It is part oral tradition, part print tradition, part television tradition, all integrated to create a fascinating whole” (Madej 2). Furthermore, there is another positive trait to be taken into account, “parents see how [computers] may be educational but fear the quality of children’s engagement with them . . . [and] are torn about their children’s involvement” (Turkle 13-14). This activity, which has merged Digital Storytelling, critical thinking and literature, has proved to be a good reason to be given to parents as to why computers could be used for something more constructive than simply playing computer games, computers can help them to think.

Notes

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² An example of which can be found in

< http://mmedia.uv.es/buildhtml?user=maldiaz&path=/&name=Cinderella_retold_ED.wmv>

³ See <<http://www.tesiboardus.com/iwb/Cinderella-Story-Book-Read-Alone-318>>

⁴ See <http://cambridgeenglishonline.com/Flashcard_maker/>

<<http://www.flashcardexchange.com/search?query=cinderella&sm=1>>

⁵ See <<http://bancoimagenes.isftic.mepsyd.es/>>, <<http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/royalty.html>>,

<<http://www.stonewashed.net/sfx.html>>

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Video Game Meets Literature: Language Learning with Interactive Fiction

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Abstract | The evolution of language teaching approaches and advances in technology have brought with them changes in how and where languages are learned.

One way in which language can be practised in a highly empowering and engaging way is through digital game-based learning (DGBL). Interactive Fiction (IF) is a text-based genre of video game which blends literature and puzzle-solving in a simulated world where the player becomes the protagonist of a narrative and controls her actions, seeing the world through her eyes. IF games respond to natural language input in a meaningful way, making them a unique form of non-linear participatory story-telling. Being both a digital game and a form of electronic literature, playing/reading IF can provide an extremely motivating, engaging and creative language learning experience, implementing all four language skills and many cognitive processes – both in and beyond the classroom.

Key words | Interactive Fiction, text adventure, video game, digital game-based learning, digital game-based language learning, literature, computer assisted language learning

Video Games Are Not Fun

Video games, often called digital games by researchers and educators, are serious. While long understood by those who play them to be much more than the generally perceived 'waste of time', 'outlet for aggression' or an activity 'only enjoyed by teenage boys', they have now become a socially accepted pastime, one of the most lucrative entertainment industries in the world (ESA), and are ever more becoming recognised as valid educational tools. But before we look at why digital games are so engaging and how they can be used for learning, let us first consider what a 'video game' is. According to Botturi and Loh, "the term is used broadly to include all digital games playable on a device with a video screen, which would include computers, games consoles, cellular phones and mobile devices" (1). But what is a game? Arriving at a clear definition of 'game' is universally considered to be a difficult task, given the multiple definitions found in dictionaries and the way 'play' and 'game' are used in the English language and in diverse fields of study (Salen and Zimmerman 81). Huizinga in his seminal work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* provides us with a definition of 'game' that is interchangeable with the meaning of 'play': "A voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (28). Salen and Zimmerman have gone further and succinctly constructed a definition of game which is more comprehensive in scope, basing it on the linguistic use of the words 'game' and 'play', while taking into account their meanings in French and German. It is additionally an amalgamation of eight definitions from various fields of study including two from veteran video game designers: "A *game* is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (81). More recently, Whitton has proposed a more open definition of 'game', which includes the following ten characteristics: Competition, Challenge, Exploration, Fantasy, Goals, Interaction, Outcomes, People, Rules and Safety (23). In her much-hyped book *Reality is Broken*, alternate-reality game designer Jane McGonigal takes a more simplified approach and suggests a four-point definition: Goal, Rules,

Feedback System & Voluntary Participation (21). The one element that perhaps surprisingly seems to be missing in every definition of 'game', however, is what many may think to be the most crucial: 'fun'. Crawford illustrates the relationship between game, play and fun (34):

- 'Game' is the formal activity that you perform.
- 'Play' is the actual behaviour that you engage in.
- 'Fun' is the experience or emotion that you derive from that behaviour.

"This relationship leads to a simple conclusion: games and play must lead to fun. If a game isn't fun, it's a bad game. It sounds perfectly logical, and it is flatly wrong" (34). He goes on to explain that

the problem with this reasoning lies in the fact that the words "game", "play," and "fun" are in flux. They have historically been associated with the behaviour of children, yet in the last century, with the creation of significant amounts of leisure time, adults have taken up play as well. This new, adult kind of play is still play by any definition, but the word "fun" doesn't quite fit the adult's experience. (34)

Michael and Chen state that 'fun' is ". . . essentially a positive feedback mechanism to get us to repeat the activity over and over . . . it is not an ingredient or something you put in. Fun is a result" (20). It can be said then, that fun is not a required component of a game, as many games are not 'fun' per se, nor can 'fun' be designed into a game, as what is 'fun' for one person might not be 'fun' for another. Therefore, in order to motivate players to invest time in play and reach a plateau of heightened engagement where they are completely focused on achieving their goals (often called 'the Flow experience' [Csikszentmihalyi]), video game designers must provide mechanisms that produce a positive emotional response from the player. To more easily understand why players are drawn to certain games and not others, the 'aesthetic principle' of the MDA framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2), also known as LeBlanc's taxonomy, suggests '8 Kinds of Fun' which can be found in video games:

- Sensation: Game as sense-pleasure;
- Fantasy: Game as make-believe;
- Narrative: Game as unfolding story;
- Challenge: Game as obstacle course;
- Fellowship: Game as social framework;
- Discovery: Game as uncharted territory;
- Expression: Game as soap box;
- Submission: Game as mindless pastime.

It is through the combination of these various triggers that a game allows a player to move from initial curiosity to becoming completely engaged, and according to the positive psychology theories of McGonigal, 'to feel good' (28). Of course, the specific source of this 'good' feeling is subjective and depends on the player as well as the game being played, but in video games, 'feeling good' can come often from:

- Taking on the identity of someone else and controlling their actions
- Being involved in the telling of a story
- Being put in a situation you would not normally be in (yet being safe)
- Facing challenges and having to overcome them – and getting instant feedback

The characteristics of digital games which make them motivating to play and engaging enough to warrant continued play, are also what make them potentially useful learning tools.

Digital Game-based Learning

The problem with this is that because we play games that provide us with the sensations that make us 'feel good', they are often seen in a less serious light, as work and play, as the saying goes, do not mix. Contrary to any negative associations, James Gee, a noted linguist and pioneering advocate of the use of digital games as a form of improving literacy, notes their

pedagogic value: “When we think of games, we think of fun. When we think of learning we think of work. Games show us this is wrong. They trigger deep learning that is itself part and parcel of the fun. It is what makes games deep” (Gee, *What Video Games* 43). Through this pedagogical lens, Gee goes on to re-define a ‘digital game’ as being: “a play-based, well-designed, problem-solving experience meant to create motivation, engagement, and often creativity” and adds that “humans learn best from well-mentored, guided experience centered on interesting problems to solve, clear goals, copious feedback, and a relatively low cost for failure. This is what good games supply” (Gee, “Big ‘G’ Games”).

Despite still being considered by many educators to be a waste of time and not fruitful to learning, the educational benefits of video games and their possible use in educational contexts have been the target of a great deal of research in the last decade (Gee, *What Video Games*; Whitton; Baek and Whitton). Indeed, the quantity of this research has grown so much that the fields of ‘game studies’, ‘digital game-based learning’ and ‘serious games’ have become respected disciplines with dedicated academic journals, professional associations, conferences and websites.

Digital Game-based Language Learning

While the literature on using digital games for structured learning across the curriculum is vast, some recent research has touted the potential of the affordances of digital games specifically for language learning (Reinders and Wattana; Reinders; Cornillie *et al.*). But despite the literature on digital game-based learning (DGBL) giving evidence of the development of cognitive and language skills through the playing of video games in and outside the classroom, can *any* video game really be used for language learning? From my own experience, I would say yes, as I will subsequently defend.

The field of using computers specifically for language learning is known as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Beatty defines CALL as: “learning language at the computer either as a direct activity through structured lessons or during an activity peripheral to the study of

language but that, nonetheless, promotes language learning awareness and acquisition” (7). When one traditionally thinks of ‘language learning materials’, what springs to mind are most certainly course books, photocopiable worksheets and activities, flashcards, pictures, recorded conversations, songs and video clips. Tomlinson defines ‘language learning materials’ as: “anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language . . . deliberately used to increase the learners’ knowledge and/or experience of the language” (2). As both of these definitions do not only include that which is solely developed for language learning, but also encompass generalised computer-based activities and authentic and unscripted real-world objects, they may, therefore, also include commercial off-the shelf (COTS) computer software and video games.

Digital games can be used for language learning in two ways:

1. Language is provided by the game itself during game-play, which learners must interact with in order to make progress through it and, ultimately, reach a successful conclusion. This is done by reading and/or listening to information provided by the game, which gives back-story, details of various game-specific statuses or clues towards immediate goals.
2. The game does not inherently provide the target language, but promotes language use *around* game-play. In this way, a digital game can be used as a jumping-off point for language use, as would any other language learning material. In most cases, in order to implement digital games in the classroom which have not have been designed specifically for learning purposes (dubbed ‘serious games’ [Michael and Chen 46]), it is necessary to provide the learners with a series of pre, while and post tasks to keep the game-playing activity aligned with the expected learning goals (Whitton 90). Through pre, while and post-playing tasks, an infinite number of activities can be implemented focusing on all four language skills, vocabulary, discrete grammar points and linguistic functions.

As an example:

Game: Portal (A first-person shooter game which focuses on using physics to solve puzzles.)

Skill: Speaking

Language Focus: vocabulary, verb tenses, modal verbs

Task: a pre-playing discussion based on the topic of the game (the future, technology, etc.)

Procedure: show a screenshot, a trailer of the game, or the introductory chapter of the actual game. Without actually playing the game, learners engage in a discussion led by the teacher on what they have seen/heard. Past tenses are used to recount what was seen, present tenses to narrate the happenings as they occur, future tenses to make predictions about what will happen before watching. Modal verbs of speculation can be used to make hypotheses.

A while-playing task (where learners actually play the whole/parts of the game) might involve note-taking, answering comprehension questions, or a group/pair-focused information gap-type task. While-playing tasks will also usually benefit from natural unscripted discourse between players (this will be explained further on).

After having played the game, a post-playing task might include a focus on form activity based on happenings in the game, such as using the third conditional structure: “If the woman hadn’t found the device, she wouldn’t have escaped the cell”, or a creative writing activity. In this way, practically any game or game genre can be used for language learning (even a game as basic as Pac-Man; for giving directions or using prepositions of place). Many digital games can more clearly be used for language learning because they provide large amounts of text or audio output, while some game genres additionally provide computer-mediated language interaction with other players, either through text-chat or voice-chat.

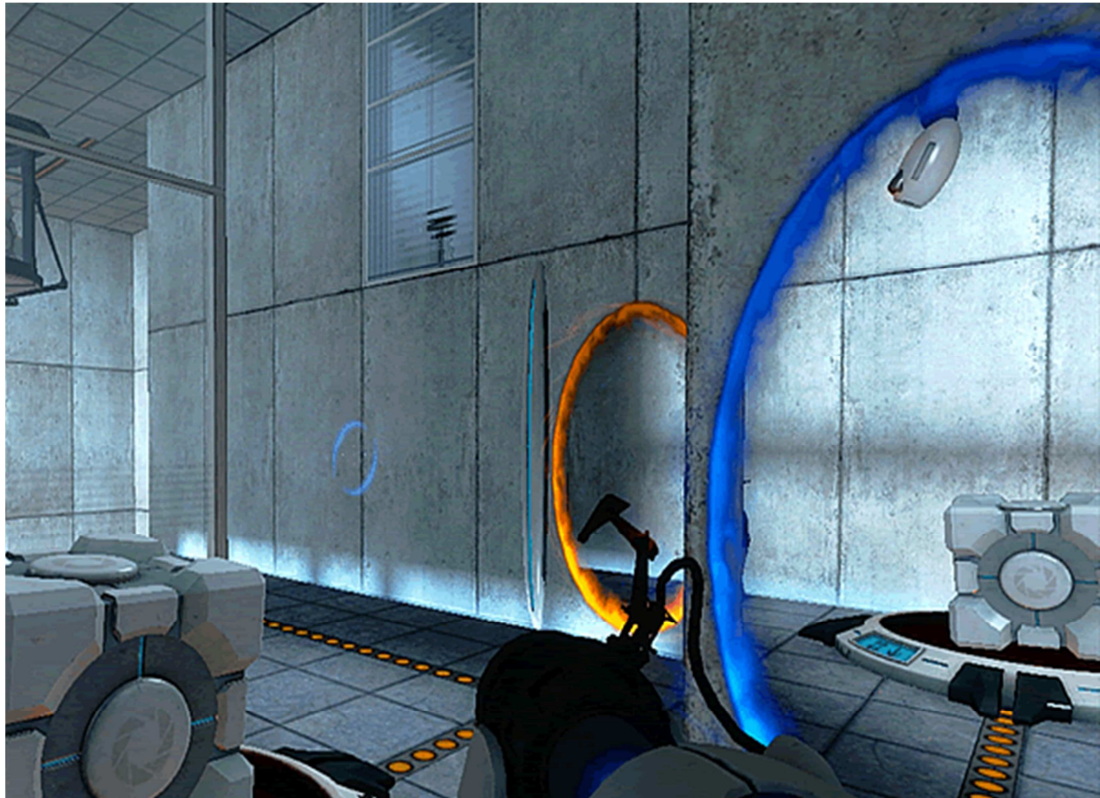


Figure 1. A screenshot from the sci-fi, physics-based *Portal* (2010)

Modern theories of second language acquisition (SLA) posit that language is learned by using it; more specifically, by making mistakes, noticing them, making the necessary changes to correct them and then using the language successfully without errors. For digital game-based language learning (DGBLL), the most complete source of input and output needed for SLA can be found in collaborative online games where a strong speaking and listening component exists alongside the need to read text and communicate via textual input. However, most games that provide opportunities for authentic language practise with other online players have open-ended, social-based gameplay, where the absence of short, meaningful language-based tasks to fulfil and the steep learning curve to play them, may make their integration into a structured language lesson difficult. In most digital games, reading or listening to the in-game text is not the main activity involved in the game-play, but mainly exists as a means to situate the player in the plot of

the game and to convey necessary information to her. The actual game-play is often based on turn-based tactical combat, real-time arcade action, point-and-click exploration, or resource management, to name just a few types – all of which require giving attention to graphical information and images on the screen, while using the mouse and keyboard as controllers in order to interact with the game. These types of games are certainly engaging, and in addition to putting into practise language and many life-long cognitive skills, they may allow for the unconscious assimilation of content knowledge, known as stealth learning (Gee, *What Video Games* 124). However, using language is the not the main point of these games, and interaction with the in-game text is often optional or can many times be glossed over without total assimilation. But for many teachers, beyond considerations of potential learner suitability or learning aim alignment, it is a question of confidence (or lack thereof) in being able to control/play video games which keeps many teachers from experimenting with digital game-based language learning (DGBLL) in the classroom – video games just look too complicated and many teachers feel completely out of their depth in their ability to play and relate to them in a classroom context. Granted, many modern games do have complex graphical user-interfaces or fiddly control mechanics (e.g. *Portal*), which add a learning curve to potential pre-existing technical considerations. However, not all video games look and behave the same. While the implementation of language tasks *around* gameplay is certainly in itself a worthwhile use of digital games as a language learning and teaching tool (see Mawer and Stanley’s pioneering book on using digital games in the language classroom), there is a genre of video game that not only uses language to provide gameplay output, but it also solely uses textual input, and in natural language, as a vehicle for communicating with the game. In this way, beyond being able to implement additional language tasks *around* the gameplay, the gameplay *in itself* becomes a language-learning task. This text-based genre of video game, once popularly known as ‘text-adventures’, is called ‘Interactive Fiction’.

Video Game Meets Literature

Interactive Fiction (IF), famously quoted as being “a crossword at war with a narrative” (Nelson 1), is a form of electronic literature, but also a digital game. It is a potential narrative – one that is shaped by the player as she explores and interacts with the game-world, and it is a series of logical puzzles within this world, which must be overcome in order for the narrative to advance. The narrative will only reveal itself with interaction from the player and unlike a traditional book, the narrative is not linear, but is brought to life and forks in whichever way the player decides to explore the game-world. As such, IF is a unique form of non-linear participatory storytelling. Montfort states that IF differs from other types of participatory storytelling such as Choose Your Adventure books and Hypertext fiction (which are often erroneously labeled as ‘Interactive Fiction’) due to its having the following characteristics (23):

- it is a text accepting and text generating computer program, and so can only be played on a digital device. It additionally understands natural language input (to an extent) and replies to this input in a meaningful way;
- it is a simulated world, which can be explored and interacted with and the player’s actions has an immediate effect on that world;
- it is a potential narrative which is co-created by the reader, and her actions and choices will create a slightly (or sometimes completely) different narrative each time it is played through;
- it is a game, meaning that it is played voluntarily, has a specific goal, and has rules which must be followed.

IF, at its best, is both a rewarding reading experience and a challenging game. Using Emily Short’s fractured fairytale masterpiece *Bronze*, a re-working of the Beauty and The Beast mythos, as an example, the IF game interface typically looks something like Figure 2.

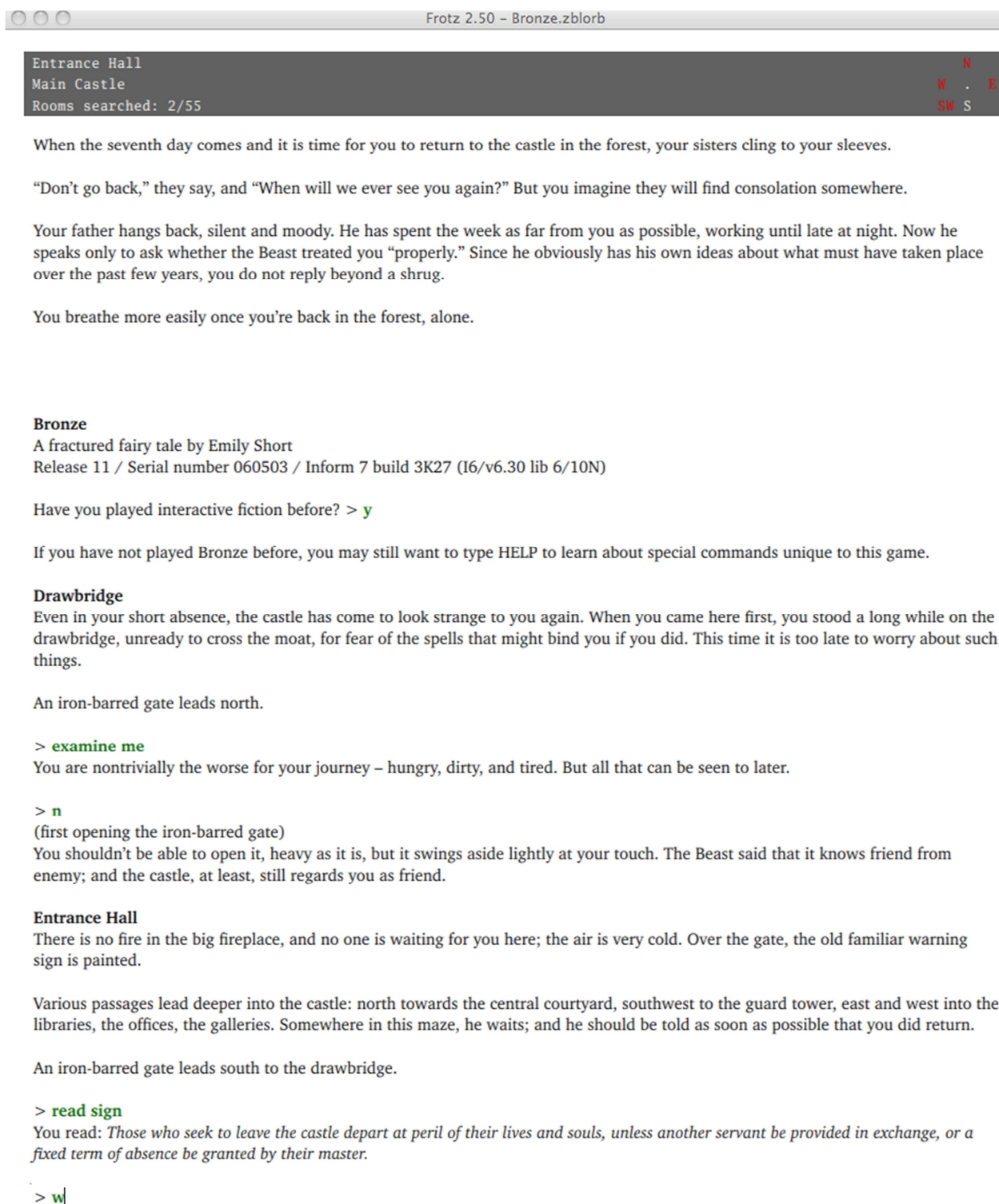


Figure 2. A screenshot from *Bronze*, by Emily Short

At the very top of the screen, the 'Status Line' traditionally presents information such as the current location of the protagonist of the story (i.e. you) and game-specific information such as a score, move or time counter. In the case of *Bronze*, the player is not only aided by being provided with a visual mini-map of possible exits from the current location (The Entrance Hall), but it also indicates which directions and rooms have yet to be visited for the first time (indicated in red). Unfortunately, not all IF games are as user-friendly as Short's games and the manual mapping of the landscape is often necessary to successfully play geographically complex IF games (those containing more than 5 or 6 locations). The space below the Status line is where the narrative comes alive. The name of the current location is shown in bold typeface and is followed by its description, what can be seen of note within it – including possibly important or useable objects, and any possible exits. Exploring these locations and interacting with the objects and people found in them is what produces new text, and in essence, creates the narrative. Narratives in IF are usually presented in the second person of the present tense so as to create a stronger connection between the reader and the protagonist through a more immersive and immediate reading experience. Murray likens this navigation of the simulated world to the dramatic happenings experienced by an actor in a theatre play: "You, as player/interactor, have walked into a dungeon that someone is sealing shut behind you! The moment is startling and immediate . . . You are not just reading about an event that occurred in the past; the event is happening now, and . . . it is happening to you" (81). The illusion that the reader, as the protagonist, is actually there in story becomes fortified even further as passive reading gives way to active participation from the reader.

The '>' symbol found after each textual exchange is called the 'command prompt' – it indicates that the game is waiting for input from the player. Most IF games will not produce further text unless the player gives the game a command. In IF, the reader must actively type in commands in natural English in order to have an effect on the game-world, thus triggering the textual output which creates the narrative. Commands are typically formed using a verb plus noun collocation or by using standard IF commands, such as LOOK or INVENTORY. While a simplified

form of language, this can nevertheless be considered a form of writing, argued by Pennington as being the process of externalizing one's thoughts (75).

A typical IF exchange might look something like this:

> **GO WEST** (or just **WEST** or **W**)

On the table in front of you is a silver bell. There seems to be something engraved on its side.

> **TAKE BELL**

You take the bell. It is much heavier than you imagined it would be.

> **INVENTORY**

You are carrying a silver bell.

> **EXAMINE BELL**

The engraved writing is in a language you do not know. Perhaps it is Elvish.

> **DECIPHER THE ELVISH ENGRAVING**

Sorry, I don't know what that means.

> **READ WRITTING**

Sorry, I don't know what 'writting' is.

> **READ WRITING**

You hopelessly try to pronounce the words, but you are unable to read the inscription.

> **RING BELL**

The bell starts ringing in your hand until it shakes so violently, you let it drop. The noise subsides upon impact with the floor and the bell becomes still. You smell brimstone in the air.

> **PICK UP BELL**

The bell has become so hot you cannot pick it up from the floor!

> **RING BELL**

You are not carrying the bell.

As can be seen in the exchanges above, the player's input meaningfully affects the state of the game-world. Player input which is understood and makes sense within the context of the

story/game-world produces new text, which becomes part of the narrative. An error message is produced if the game does not understand a command due to a spelling, syntax or vocabulary related error (as was the case with WRITTING), or simply because the action is not possible or irrelevant to the story. While modern IF games are able to understand many common verbs and their synonyms, they can't understand every word the player produces (as was the case with DECIPHER THE ELVISH ENGRAVING). Typing in an unknown verb or command results in an error message such as "I don't know how to ...", "You can't do that", or even a contextual retort, proving that the game really is listening to what you are telling it! At this point, the reader will need to reformulate their command using different words, try something different altogether or continue exploring. A list of many common verbs and IF-specific commands can be found on the 'IF For Beginners' cheat sheet, shown in Figure 3.

You just started up a game and now you're staring at text and a blinking cursor and you don't know what to do! (**> |**)

Don't panic kids—
Crazy Uncle Zarf is here to help you get started...

These commands are very common:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| EXAMINE it | PUSH it |
| TAKE it | PULL it |
| DROP it | TURN it |
| OPEN it | FEEL it |
| PUT it IN something | |
| PUT it ON something | |

When in doubt, examine more.

Does the game intro suggest ABOUT, INFO, HELP?

Try them first!

Also: Up, Down, IN, and OUT

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.

You can try all sorts of commands on the things you see.

Try the commands that make sense! Doors are for opening; buttons are for pushing; pie is for eating. (Mmm, pie.)

◆◆◆◆

If you meet a person, these should work:

TALK TO name
ASK name **ABOUT** something
TELL name **ABOUT** something
GIVE something **TO** name
SHOW something **TO** name

Each game has slightly different commands, but they all look pretty much like these.

You could also try:

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| EAT it | CLIMB it |
| DRINK it | WAVE it |
| FILL it | WEAR it |
| SMELL it | TAKE it OFF |
| LISTEN TO it | TURN it ON |
| BREAK it | DIG IN it |
| BURN it | ENTER it |
| LOOK UNDER it | SEARCH it |
| UNLOCK it WITH something | |
| Or even: | |
| LISTEN | JUMP |
| SLEEP | PRAY |
| WAKE UP | CURSE |
| UNDO [†] | SING |

[†] Take back one move — handy!

“What if I only want to type one or two letters?”

◆◆◆◆

N/E/S/W/NE/SE/NW/SW: GO in the indicated compass direction.

L: LOOK around to see what is nearby.

X: EXAMINE a thing in more detail.

I: take INVENTORY of what you possess.

Z: WAIT a turn without doing anything.

G: do the same thing AGAIN

◆◆◆◆

A service of the People's Republic of Interactive Fiction: <http://pr-if.org>

Figure 3. The 'IF for Beginners' cheat sheet (Plotkin and Albaugh)

Second-Person Thinker

IF does not merely involve exploring the virtual space inside the narrative by moving from location to location and examining and manipulating the objects found within them. What makes IF transcend beyond merely being a literary genre and offering a potentially interesting *reading* experience is that it is also a digital game genre, thus allowing for a potentially challenging *gaming* experience. The game element of IF exists in two distinct ways:

1. as the linguistic guessing game of communicating one's thoughts to the computer in a manner in which it will be understood;
2. in the form of logical puzzles embedded in the narrative, which need to be solved using critical and lateral thinking.

Puzzles in IF may be as straightforward as finding a key to unlock a door or they may be more abstract and involve understanding the specific rules governing the game-world and the objects found within it (e.g. learning how to use magic in a fantasy-themed IF work or manipulating a mechanical device in a sci-fi game).

This cognitive challenge involving the discovery of solutions to observational and mental problems is especially suited to the written medium, in contrast to the dexterity and reflex-based challenges of most graphics-based video game genres. As a result of this, the IF genre has been called "second person thinker" (Scott) (contrasting with the immensely popular first-person shooter genre) and contrary to many other game genres, is widely enjoyed by an older audience, as well as by physically-challenged and sight-impaired players. While primarily offering a sense of challenge to the player, puzzles also serve as pacing and gateway mechanisms in the narrative, thus ensuring that the player has assimilated all of the text and performed all of the required actions before being able to move on in the story.

Why Use Interactive Fiction for Language Learning?

Many learners do not think of reading for pleasure, especially in a foreign language, as a necessary way to improve their language skills, and even less as a worthwhile way to spend their free time. Reading is one of the more prominent skills involved in foreign language learning as it is a vehicle for introducing vocabulary, grammatical forms and cultural notions. Research has shown that reading is an interactive and parallel process involving 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' processes (Eskey and Grabe 223), concepts summarised as being "metaphors for the complex mental process of reading, top here referring to such higher order mental concepts as the knowledge and expectations of the reader, and bottom to the physical text on the page". Widdowson considers the act of reading "not as a reaction to the text, but as interaction between writer and reader mediated through text" (74). McKay further adds that this interaction "occurs on the linguistic and conceptual levels in that reading necessitates the ability to interact with a text by decoding the language and comprehending the concepts presented" (192). In other words, what the reader brings to the text is as important as the text itself. Using our personal knowledge of the world to assist in constructing meaning in a given context is called using schemata, defined by Bartlett as "an active organisation of past reactions, or past experience" (201) and is an essential part of the reading comprehension process. The ability to activate schema has a tremendous impact on the understanding of a text or utterance as we constantly need to map what we read or hear to what we already know about it in order to form meaning. When there is mismatch between the text and our existing knowledge of the world during the top-down process and the decoding of words and understanding of meaning during the bottom-up process, this leads to non-comprehension. However, the only way to gain the linguistic knowledge and schemata needed to improve reading skills is by engaging in the actual process of reading (Day and Bamford). Many learners do not practice extensive reading and engage in schema-building outside the classroom, and, as a result, they are not very imaginative and have difficulties in thinking critically and laterally in order to solve logical problems – they are essentially unable to 'think outside the box'. It is for this primary reason of improving reading fluency that I use IF with

my learners. As a form of DGBLL, IF can provide an extremely motivating and engaging reading experience which may provide opportunities for the improvement of reading skills, and potentially contribute to better reading fluency – while at the same time building schema and scripts, and exercising important critical and lateral thinking skills. Furthermore, because the vast majority of IF is made available for free by its authors on the Internet and the technological resources needed to play it are negligible (any computer from the last 25 years or any mobile device will do), there is no real reason not to experiment using it with learners.

Interactive Fiction and DGBLL

Due to the interactive and challenging nature of the game-play, IF provides a potentially more engaging reading experience than can be found when using static text, and it has a truly authentic goal – to reach the end of the story. IF works exist in every literary genre and their level of challenge can range from very puzzle-focused to more narrative-focused and from multiple-location games requiring many hours to complete to single-room games, which can be finished in minutes. The variety of genres, challenges and literary styles found in IF make it a viable alternative to static texts for improving reading fluency and it is also an excellent tool for encouraging reluctant readers to embrace reading for pleasure, both in and out of the classroom. As it is a form of authentic literature IF might not be easily integrated into a syllabus based on discrete language points. However, IF can be used as any work of literature would be used in the classroom – to focus on a theme or topic, or for specific literary analysis. Because IF, like all digital games, provides instant feedback, it can be used for autonomous self-directed learning. Playing most IF requires understanding nearly all the words found in the text. Most words cannot be glossed over; not understanding them may simply not allow the reader to make further progress until their meaning has been made clear and the words have been acted upon. In this way, making progress through an IF game is clear evidence that the reader has understood the text by applying both bottom-up and top-down reading strategies. Desilets notes that the need to create meaning by piecing together the various parts of text in order to solve puzzles “adds an

evaluative dimension of considerable instructional power, an element that operates even when the teacher isn't around" (7) and posits that these "aesthetically-placed pauses for problems thus become, among other things, compelling and integrated reading comprehension tests, perhaps the only such tests that most kids will take voluntarily" (8). IF can be used for digital game-based language learning because it is in line with the principles of second language acquisition (SLA) and the communicative approach to language teaching (CLT). At the forefront is the clear implementation of the comprehensible input and output hypotheses. While Krashen's 'Input Hypothesis' states that only comprehensible input is required for SLA, Swain's 'Comprehensible Output Hypothesis' asserts that learner output is also a critical component of SLA. It is this continuous cycle of textual input/output between the reader and the game that constructs the story, while at the same time being the strongest language learning element in IF. Language presented by the game (learner input) must be processed by using both bottom-up and top-down reading processes, which must then be actively used to give the protagonist commands (learner output). Game output pertaining to spelling, semantic or syntactic errors will require the reader to 'notice' her mistakes and attempt to correct them. It is because of its parser-based input that IF is a more complete language learning tool than other textual forms of participatory story-telling, such as Hypertext fiction. While possibly seeming to be a tool solely used to practice the reading and writing skills, practice of the speaking and listening skills can be implemented simply by having learners play IF in pairs or small groups. This act of two or more people working at a single computer and engaging in communication with each other in order to accomplish a given task is known as computer-mediated collaborative learning (CMCL). In CMCL, the computer itself becomes a source of generating language between its users. The greatest opportunity for SLA during CMCL occurs when the discourse between learners allows for 'negotiation of meaning', defined by Pica as the "modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility" (495). Mercer and Wegrif have identified three types of discourse from conversation around computers: exploratory talk, which involves discussion and the negotiation

and validation of opinions; cumulative talk, which is evidenced by suggestion, confirmation and validation; and disputation talk, which reflects the competitive nature of a task by involving disagreement and individual decision-making (95). In this way, in addition to reading and writing, the listening and speaking skills can also be practised while playing IF – and this is often the case, even if the learners are unaware that it is taking place. Nonetheless, extended work on all four skills can additionally be implemented in tasks in the pre- and post-playing phases. With regards to assessment, if used primarily as an activity for practicing reading, IF inherently tests reading comprehension and gives immediate feedback. More traditional assessment can be done in conjunction with pre-, while and post-reading activities. Notwithstanding, O’Connell offers the following view on the need for assessment when using literature with learners: “once we engage the student in a text and treat them as readers, where the reading in itself is a creative act, forming a potentially dynamic partnership with the writer, then the individual, personal and subjective nature of the activity transcends any glib approach to assessment, such as right/wrong answers” (13). For a more in-depth appraisal of the language learning affordances of IF, see (Pereira, “Using Interactive Fiction”).

Learner Perceptions of Interactive Fiction

Because of its lack of graphics, IF may initially seem like a hard sell to learners, many of whom are avid gamers. In spite of this, while there will be learners who will have limited interest because there are no flashy graphics, most will quickly recognise the benefits of using IF as a language learning tool. Pereira, in a case study on learner perceptions of using IF to practice language skills (“Beyond hidden bodies”) has shown that learners see IF as a more ‘fun’ and engaging way to practice reading for fluency and clearly recognise the strong focus on vocabulary, verbs and problem-solving/imagination building, even after only a short time playing. Regarding specific aspects of language learning, feedback revealed that students perceived vocabulary and verbs to be the main linguistic focus in IF, as seen in the following statements:

- 'We need to think about verbs in order to advance in the game because we are more focused on the text of the game and because in order to finish it we need to pay a lot of attention to find out things that allow us to move on';
- 'It could be an important tool to learn new vocabulary and to use different types of vocabulary that is used in more practical situations and not typical classroom behaviour';
- 'English is being practised when you command your character and you sometimes have to try to find other words to say the same thing you meant for the computer to understand what you are saying'.

Learners also commented on how they see IF as both an educational activity and a game, and why it was so engaging to play:

- It's a game because you have fun playing it and because it has the characteristics of a game. It's educational because the educational component is always present during the game. In IF, although you are learning English, you sometimes don't understand it because you are really enjoying the game.
- We learn English because we have to pay more attention to the words because we want to move on.
- I had the freedom to make my character do what I wanted him to do and I didn't know what to expect – that's what makes IF fun.

The case study also confirmed my hypothesis that learners would be more willing to play an IF game autonomously at home as a way to practice reading than by reading a traditional book, with some learners even mentioning that they would consider playing IF at home as a leisure activity. IF may thus be considered to be an engaging alternative to traditional text for reading fluency practice, both in the classroom and in an autonomous learning context. Despite

the positive learner perceptions, there are potential challenges that need to be addressed when using IF with learners. Because it is an authentic text and has not been scripted for language learners, games need to be carefully selected taking into account the topic and content, the level of puzzle difficulty and of course, the level of English necessary to successfully play it. In my experience, most IF is best used with upper-intermediate level and above learners, given the authentic nature of the texts and the vocabulary needed to understand them. Nevertheless, there are IF games that have been used with pre-Intermediate/Intermediate learners with some success. Moreover, in addition to linguistic considerations, one must remember that it is difficult to please all learners with our chosen learning materials. Like any book, IF has the potential to draw every type of learner into its story provided the reader finds it appealing. When this is the case, learners will go to great lengths to reach the goal of the game. Conversely, if the reader isn't swayed by the topic matter (or the activity in general) and merely glosses over the text and does not fully engage with it, she will not be able to form the cognitive links necessary to solve the puzzles which bar the way to traversing to the text, and as a result, will most likely lose all interest. This will most often be the biggest barrier for some learners – not a linguistic one, but one of a cognitive nature. IF will be enjoyed by learners who enjoy challenges and have developed imaginations and some capacity for problem-solving. To be sure, even experienced IF players still get stuck in IF games, and without hints or walkthroughs to help them through difficult puzzles, abandonment is often not far off. Thankfully, hints, maps and walkthroughs are readily available on the Internet for most games. Teachers can download hundreds of high-quality IF game files for free from the Interactive Fiction Database (IFDB) (www.ifdb.tads.org). In order to play an IF game file, a free piece of software, called an 'interpreter', is required (such as *Gargoyle*, or *Frotz*). Interpreters exist for nearly every mobile and computer operating system and are very quick and easy to download and install. Many IF games are also playable directly from web-based interpreters in a web-browser, either accessed from the IFDB or from Parchment (<http://parchment.toolness.com/>). Further support is available for teachers at IF Only: Interactive Fiction and Teaching English as a Foreign Language TEFL/TESOL (www.theswanstation.com),

which has articles on how to choose and implement IF in a lesson, as well as detailed lesson plans on using carefully selected games, with support documents such as vocabulary lists, maps and walkthroughs.

Conclusion

IF can be considered to be valid and useful language learning material because it is:

- Extremely interactive and potentially more engaging to read than a standard text – thus becoming a novel way for learners to improve their reading fluency and schema-building.
- Usable in the classroom and at home – the perfect tool for autonomous reading practice, possibly leading to an interest in reading for pleasure.
- In line with modern principles of SLA, especially with regards to the ‘input/output hypotheses’ of Krashen and Swain.
- An example of authentic material with a meaningful goal as per the communicative language teaching approach (CLT).
- A game where the totality of the game-play involves interacting directly with language, mostly through reading and writing.
- A game perfectly suited for additional speaking and listening activities and grammar-focused activities through the implementation of pre-, while- and post-playing tasks designed around the content of the game.
- Heavily dependent on problem-solving skills and imagination-building.
- Completely text-based with natural language input and output. No confusing graphical interface, no complicated control schemes; a perfect primer to DGBL for language teachers as they are experts in the domain of language, thus giving them a feeling of empowerment in an area where students often have the upper-hand.

Despite the challenges mentioned previously, IF is unique in being able to provide the affordances of literature and video games, offering learners and language teachers an exciting and engaging way to practice language skills and to become involved in DGBLL. The enormous quantity of available games and the various levels of support for players and educators should make even the first experience a successful one, and surely one to be repeated many times.

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Teaching Languages to European Computer Science
Students in an Engineering Institute in Portugal:
Translation Approaches in the English, German and
French Classroom

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Abstract | This paper aims at providing an analysis of using translation methods in teaching languages to undergraduates in the Transnational European Computer Science Engineering Degree in an engineering polytechnic institute in Portugal. The main language covered is English and includes a detailed analysis of a language activity on word formation with prefixes. Both German and French languages are also referred to so as to illustrate the different treatments each requires due to these languages' different profiles.

Accordingly, one of the reasons to consider translation of native language (L1) to second language (L2) tasks for the English subject is because challenging material is required for these students since often they have had at least seven years of language training from secondary school. On the other hand, groups' language levels tend to be quite heterogeneous. Data of students' grades from 2012/2013 academic years are used to illustrate a prototype of this feature, thus influencing an option of a challenging language activity of L1 to L2.

There is a discussion of translation techniques in language teaching indicating that there are more benefits than drawbacks. A brief discussion of this method in teaching languages, as well as its advantages and limitations is provided and based on scholarly research carried out.

The relevance of multilingualism and multiculturalism of our future engineers is hopefully understood and encouraged as a result of this work, as these professionals can no longer be restricted to proficiency in one or two languages. In what concerns the transnational courses, there is cause to consider the inclusion of translation approaches in transnational course degrees.

Key words | language, teaching, translation, multilingualism, European Computer Science, English for specific purposes

I. Introduction and Background Information

This paper is about teaching languages to European Computer Science undergraduate students at a polytechnic institute in engineering in the city of Coimbra in Portugal.

The European Computer Science three-year undergraduate degree is a transnational university course. Students study two years in Portugal and in the third and last year study abroad from a choice of countries including Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Romania and Spain. In this course students are required to have two years of language training in two foreign languages. These are English, which is compulsory, and either German or French. The main language analyzed in this study is English. However, a less detailed analysis of both German and French languages will also be included in this discussion.

This study is informative and practical and is based on the authors' experience in language teaching. Concerning the application of translation activities in language teaching, a discussion is provided on the method's pedagogical influences, which is based on research and other scholars' testimonies. With regards to this method of teaching for the English subject, data of students' grades and class attendance is illustrated to justify its use as a challenging language task.

The objectives of this paper are: 1) to provide an in-depth look at teaching word formation using prefixes in the English language through a translation approach of the native language (L1) into the second language (L2); 2) to illustrate the validity of translation tools in the language classroom especially in transnational course degrees; 3) to demonstrate the underlying pedagogical purpose and personal and professional outcomes this method is expected to provide engineering students who will study and work abroad.

Part II points out features European Computer Science course students share, regardless of the language they study and the countries they choose to go to. In Part III there is discussion of the use of translation methods in the language classroom and how other scholars

are viewing it. The final part is an analysis of the language activities with translation methods in mind. Main focus will be on the English language.

II. Common Features in the European Computer Science Course Degree

In this part, we will briefly discuss the common bonds students have in the European Computer Science (ECS) undergraduate course degree, regardless of the languages they choose to take and the countries they study in.

Firstly, ECS students are prepared to be multi-lingual as well as multi-cultural in the language classroom. The importance of being bilingual has become obsolete in Europe and therefore in any transnational European course. Hence, European college students studying abroad should be fluent in at least three languages: the native tongue, English and another language.

A merging point amongst the different languages is from a pedagogical perspective. Instructors make use of translation methods to develop not only linguistic proficiency, but also to understand and accept cultural diversity. ECS subjects are organized in a way to include information about international differences and all language subject syllabuses draw on respective cultures.

The ECS course plan also includes a specific subject called *European Module* that focuses on the diverse cultures within Europe. The syllabus of this subject comprises the frontiers between languages and cultures and the implications of linguistic and intercultural issues for the job market. Political, historical, social and cultural aspects of Europe are also included in their broadest sense.

Pereira *et al.* (2011) discussed in a report about the ECS course the cultural shock concerning a wide range of issues. In some countries, for example, administrative tasks are very complex. The same applies to documentation in the educational arena. The culture shock not only applies to customs, traditions and bureaucratic norms but to more intricate matters

including grading systems, educational demands, teacher student rapport, classroom procedures concerning projects and assignments, to name a few.

Finally, and as an indicator of how well students are able to apply what is taught to them in the language classroom, ECS students are required to pass internationally recognized exams before going abroad. The external language exams students must take include the Cambridge University First Certificate English Examinations or Cambridge Advanced Examinations. Students choosing French must take the exams offered by the *Alliance Française*, and for German exams are offered by the *ÖSD - Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch*.

III. Translation Methods in the ECS Language Subjects

A. Translation as a means of teaching languages in ECS

While on the one hand mother tongue referral in language teaching in the classroom continues to have negative connotations in this profession, on the other hand seems to have brighter and more tolerable tones (Simões and Guincho 459). The act of translation from one language to another is very much a natural and spontaneous mental action of many individuals who are in contact with more than one language.

In Portugal movies and TV programs are not normally dubbed but instead have subtitles. Observers naturally read subtitles and listen to English or other languages at the same time. The music Portuguese youth listen to is primarily in English, and cerebral translations are automatically made in order to understand the lyrics and what the musician wants to convey. Concerning the academic world, both students and researchers alike study from sources in English, German, French or Spanish. As a result, self-study will be a part of a conversion process, which begins with the first language (L1). Translating in these situations is about negotiating language and is as unavoidable as the senses of perception. In Portugal it is rare, as well as difficult, to find academic research literature translated into Portuguese. Thus, the

Portuguese scholar has to find ways to understand the different languages of her or his specific area (Simões and Guincho 462).

As a natural part of human structure, it could be counter-productive to deny its use. Concerning the European Computer Science students who will be studying and living abroad, the ability to recognize similarities and differences is an important tool as these skills are transferred to other situations, namely professional, interpersonal and cultural relationships.

B. A discussion of translation as a teaching method

Constructivism, an educational method popular in Europe, relies on learners' past experiences to construct present and future knowledge (Machida). Thus, any learning cannot be separate from that which is prior experience. Concerning language, L1 and L2 (second language) are inseparable, since mother tongue language (L1) is part of the individual's construct and prior know-how.

From a physical angle regarding how the brain functions, Machida sums up what lies behind translation as an instinctive device and resulting useful tool.

According to our current understanding of vocabulary storage in the brain (e.g. connectionist model of (Macaro), bilinguals access one common storage system containing both L1 and L2 vocabulary. L1 is thus considered to assist learners' comprehension of L2 by creating more networks between nodes (ideational representation and words) in their long terms memory. (142)

Given this stance, a translation strategy or referral to the mother tongue could partake one of the methods used in language teaching since it is a natural part of human individuals.

Vanessa Leonardi teaches English for Specific Purposes at the University of Ferrara in Italy. Her article focuses on the application of the translation skill in the four language skills plus the vocabulary and cultural aspects. According to her, for Business English it is an appropriate technique because there are not always equivalent translations from one language to the other. In this specialized language successful transfer or communication is vital to successful business

purposes. Concerning cultural aspects, cultural differences exist in the business world and include etiquette, business norms, etc. To this scholar, it is important for linguistic and cultural differences to be compared through translation thus “employing a contrastive approach to language” (Leonardi 150). This will also be pointed out when discussing the German exercise model in part IV.

Ts Dilkova uses translation in English teaching at the University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy in Bulgaria. According to this author, in this country using translation as a technique in learning languages may become popular. The focus of the article is on cognitive psychology and its application in teaching language in which learners are involved and a responsible active member in the learning process. The link to the mother tongue will enable these learners to become more connected to the target language as in this author’s opinion “grammar becomes less frightening and more accessible” (451). This scholar explains that cognitive instruction is a mental process and so the teacher needs to affect this part so that learning can take place.

Posen Liao’s case study about Taiwanese learners’ beliefs of using translation in learning English showed that learners in beginning stages of the language progression look highly to this strategy because it helped them with the skills and vocabulary and helped to reduce frustrations. Even at advanced levels, more proficient learners believed that translation was a useful tool and helped to develop further the language proficiency (201).

Machida performed a study on the effect of translation as a main strategy in teaching Advanced Japanese as a second language to English speaking natives in Australia. For the most part, students were pleased with the use of translation in language development, though there was disagreement on the quantity of its application. The final outcome was that translation as a main method was “feasible” (154). According to the author, translation as a technique needed to be improved on.

UNESCO has provided support of the use of Mother Tongue in education to fight discrimination and promote education especially for ethno-linguistic minorities. According to this organization, research has shown that results indicate educational achievement for ethno-linguistic minorities in Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education programs carried out. At a conference about this subject matter, Kim Gwang-Jo, Director of UNESCO Bangkok, claimed that when education is taught in students' languages, learners "readily transfer literacy skills to official languages of education, thus acquiring essential tools for lifelong learning".

Most advantages of translation use in the classroom can include a sense of security especially when related to the affective factor of cognitive education (Dilkova 451; Liao 201; Machida). It is a continuation of a natural tendency connecting the learner's familiar world (mother tongue) to an unfamiliar one (target language).

Another advantage mentioned is that it can save time (Dilkova 151). In certain situations such as unknown vocabulary, it obviously saves time by providing a direct translation from L2 to L1 rather than pantomime it. Although this can be seen as an easy way out, it is, on the other hand, clearly more practical. This is especially workable with lexis that has an unambiguous translation. The word red, for example, has a simple meaning often very unequivocal.

Conversion to mother tongue to check concept meaning, for example, can be a means to detect common mistakes. An example of word order concerning this topic is found in Simões and Guincho (162). In English, for example, the common word order of the simple sentence is Subject + Verb + Object. The sentence: *I like chocolate very much* in Portuguese is translated correctly as *Eu gosto muito de chocolate*. In English *very much* comes after the object while in Portuguese, *very much* (or in Portuguese *muito*) is before the object. So there is a tendency for Portuguese learners of English to follow the Portuguese word order and say *I like very much chocolate*. If the learners know and understand the reason for this persistent mistake via translation exercises, they may more easily attempt to resist its repetition. Understanding the source helps to break bad habits since the common inaccuracy has been given a name.

Another benefit referred to is a sense of achievement felt by the learners (Dilkova 151). The conversion of L2 to L1 is more common so than the contrary. However, exercises in which L1 is converted to L2 are very difficult. A language learner able to do these demonstrates an ability to do one of the most difficult types of language exercises. These will be looked at when discussing the English language activity.

On the other hand, there are limitations in using translation activities in the classroom and certain conditions should be met. For example, the classroom should be monolingual. This is not much of an obstacle in Portugal since classrooms are quite linguistically homogeneous when compared to other European countries and certain cities (Paris, London, as examples).

Furthermore, a teacher may not be qualified since it is obvious that this professional needs to be fluent in the L1 language, as well as well-informed of the mother-tongue culture since language is inseparable from its culture. Simões and Guincho state the reason for this is so that the teacher is able to prepare an exercise correctly (162). If not done properly, translation exercises can be counterproductive and create problems. For example, an exercise should not be in a form so as to forcefully elicit a desired answer in the target language. The sentence in Portuguese: *Eu gosto muito de chocolate* (translated literally as *I like very much chocolate*) should not be *Eu gosto de chocolate muito* (translated literally to *I like chocolate very much*) so as to obtain the correct English translation. The Portuguese sentence *Eu gosto de chocolate muito* is not correct in terms of register since it is not the way it is said in Portuguese and is therefore unnatural. Hence, translation from L1 to L2 must take into account form, register, idiom and style of the L1 in order to be correct from a pedagogical perspective and to do this it is very difficult requiring teachers' fluency in both languages to do so (162). The importance of word order is also analyzed in the following part in teaching German as a second language.

For the most part, this kind of didactic material has to be “home made”. It is unlikely to find instant made exercises from course books or the Internet. Furthermore, the exercise done for one group may not be able to be used for another one – even if very similar.

The following part provides model exercises of the use of translation in both English and German teaching.

IV. Language Activity Models Using Translation Methods

A. ECS English language subject

1. Students’ language background and present situation

Most high school graduates have had at least 7 years of English instruction. English classes usually begin in the first year of middle school (5th grade) and continue until the 11th grade. In the last decade, this number has gradually risen as English has begun to be taught even in primary school.

It seems rather dubious that, after so many years of English instruction from high school, these undergraduates do not have at least a B2 level. Unfortunately, many recent high school undergraduates have between A2 and B1 English levels. On the other hand, most of these students can “get by” when communicating orally, and “informal” interaction levels can be quite good. This is due to the massive input of the English language through Internet, cinema, and music we discussed earlier. However, accuracy levels in both oral and written skills are outlandishly deficient. Levels can go all the way down to a low A2.

Out of the 21 students who sat the *Inglês II* final exam in the second semester, 2013, only 3 attended lessons on a regular basis and 2 of these have C1 levels. The third student had a low A2 level. Four of the 21 students attended lessons on an irregular basis and final scores were 10, 12, 14 and 19 with English levels of A2, a low B2, B2 and C1. The remainder 14 students never went to lessons and final grades were 8, 10, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 16, 17, 17, 18 and 19. The final exam is a B2 level exam, but students only achieve B2 level with a

grade of 12 or higher. Grades marked 18 and over are considered C1 level. For this group of 21, we have 2 with A2 levels, 4 with B1 levels, 3 with low B2 levels, 7 with B2 levels and 5 with either strong B2 levels or low C1 levels. Language levels, grades and class attendance of the *Inglês II* subject are charted in the table below.

| Level | A1 | A2 | B1 | B2 (low) | B2 (high) | C1 (low) |
|---|------------|----------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Grade Reference | 7 or lower | 8-10 | 10-11 | 12-13 | 14-17 | 18-20 |
| <i>Grades</i> | | 8, 8 | 10, 10, 10, 11 | 12, 12, 13 | 14, 14, 15, 16, 16, 17, 17 | 18, 19, 19, 19, 19 |
| <i>Grades of students attending classes</i> | | 8 | | | | 19, 19 |
| <i>Grades of students NOT attending</i> | | 8 | 10,10, 11 | 12, 13 | 14, 15, 16,16, 17, 17 | 18, 19 |
| <i>Total students & levels</i> | 0 (A1) | 2 (A2) | 4 (B1) | 3 (lowB2) | 7 (highB2) | 5 (C1) |

An important point here is a clear indication of spread out levels. Another point of relevance is that students with low levels, which are 4 (with grades 8, 10, 10, and 11 and in red print) and those barely achieving B2 levels, which are 2 (with grades 12 and 13), do not attend lessons. These account for 6 out of 14, a little less than 50% of those not attending lessons at all. The issue at hand now is to find an innovating and challenging way to revise language and present new language to a somewhat heterogeneous group with quite a few students with

upper-intermediate levels (B2). This is when the language instructor decided to use a method that could be challenging and somewhat advanced.

The next part will discuss the language issue of word formation with a focus on prefixes.

2. English exercise sample

This section is further divided into three building blocks. The first describes the aims and methods of the language exercise. The second shows the exercise. Then, a detailed explanation of the language and methods in the exercise is given.

a. Language exercise plan

Objectives:

- 1) Revise previous knowledge
- 2) Deepen knowledge of word formation
- 3) Break bad language habits
- 4) Stimulate automatic transition from mother tongue to L2

Language Focus: Word formation with a focus on prefixes

Method(s): Translation method – native language (L1) to second language (L2) – and dissection of word formation (prefix + root word)

b. Language exercise

Definition of Prefix: Generally when you add a prefix to a root word, the spelling of the prefix and the root words stays the same. A root word stands on its own as a word, but you can make new words from it by adding beginnings (prefixes). When you add a prefix to a word, the meaning of that word changes.

| Prefix | Examples |
|--------|--|
| -re | reappear, redo, replay, retake |
| -dis | disagree, disappear, disappoint, disbelief, disconnect, discover, dishonest, dislike, dismiss, disrespect |
| -im | immature, immoral, impatient, impolite, impractical |
| -il | illegal, illogical |
| -un | uncooked, unfriendly, unharmed, unimaginable, unintended, unkind, unlike, unlucky, unreal, unusual, unwanted |
| -ir | irregular, irresponsible |
| -in | Incapable, incredible, inhuman, invisible |
| -over | overboard, overcharge, overcrowded, overload |
| -under | underestimate, underweight |
| -post | Postgraduate |
| -ex | ex-husband, ex-President |
| -sub | submarine, subway |
| -mis | misinform, misinterpret, mispronounce, mistake |

Exercise 1. Translate the sentences into English by using the word in parenthesis with the correct suffix.

1. A situação é irreal. (real)
2. Não devias subestimar as suas capacidades. (estimate)
3. Ele cobrou-me a mais. (charge)
4. O barco estava sobrecarregado. (load)
5. As crianças em alguns países pobres têm peso insuficiente. (weight)
6. Ele saiu ileso. (harm)
7. O aluno foi dispensado. (miss)
8. O filme foi uma grande desilusão. (appoint)

9. Estas batatas estão ainda cruas. (cook)
10. É muito mal-educada. (polite)
11. Não é prático. (practical)
12. Essas pessoas não são desejadas. (wanted)
13. É uma pessoa antipática. (kind)
14. São pessoas pouco simpáticas. (friendly)
15. Fui mal interpretada. (interpret)
16. Pronunciaste mal as palavras. (pronounce)

Exercise 2. Now choose words from the table and write sentences.

c. Language exercise explanation

The Portuguese definition of prefixes is very similar to the English one. In both languages it is basically about adding an affix before a root word. Many of the prefixes are similar especially those from Greek and Latin origin (*-re* from Latin and *-anti* from Greek), but there are those that are visually different (*-over* in English and *-sobre* in Portuguese) but with the same meaning (both *-over* and *-sobre* mean excess). There are also those that are used in one language but not in the other language (the prefix *-mis*, of German origin, is used in English but not in Portuguese). The concept of word formation is not a difficulty for the Portuguese student since the idea is identical in both languages. However, confusions begin with which prefix is to be used.

This section explains where these differences lie. It is based on the English model exercise. Therefore it is simplified, roughly outlined and narrowed down to the relevant exercise. The explanation begins with the most similar prefix situations and therefore the simplest for the Portuguese student to learn and apply. Each item thereafter exemplifies a gradual complexity in word formation with prefixes in both languages.

We will initiate this part with word formation plus prefix combinations that are similar in both languages. Three of them are described hereunder.

There are word formation + prefixes “parallel” between English and Portuguese as they have visually identical prefixes and the same meaning when the prefix is added to the root words. There are many examples of those with the prefix *-re*: *redo* in Portuguese is *refazer*. Other examples include some words that take the prefix in English *-dis* (in Portuguese there is the prefix *-dis/-des*, both of Latin origin and identical meaning) as in *disappear* and in Portuguese is *desaparecer*, the prefix *-im* as in the word *impatient* which in Portuguese is *impaciente*, the prefix *-in* as in the word *invisible* and in Portuguese is *invisível*, the prefix *-ex* as in *ex-husband* which is *ex-marido* in Portuguese, and the prefix *-sub* as in *submarine* which in Portuguese is *submarino*.

There are word formation combinations + prefixes which are similar but not identical. The prefixes *-il* and *-ir* in English, for example, have comparable prefixes in Portuguese, but in Portuguese there exists the prefix *-i* (or *ir*). The English word *illegal* in Portuguese is *ilegal* and the English word *irresponsible* is *irresponsável* in Portuguese. Another comparable word formation combination plus a prefix includes the prefix *-post*, which is *-pós* in Portuguese. The word *post-graduation* is *pós-graduação*. Because of the likeness of the aforementioned word formation combinations concerning prefix and/or meaning, they are not too complicated for the Portuguese student.

Other prefixes are present in both languages with the same meanings but do not look alike at all. These include *-over* and *-under*. In English you have *overload* and in Portuguese there is *sobrecarga*. The prefix *-sobre* has the same meaning of the prefix *-over* but looks nothing alike. The word *underestimate* is translated as *subestimar*. The prefix *-under* has the same meaning of the prefix *-sub* but looks differently.

The following examples of word formation taking a prefix have very few resemblances concerning prefix and overall meaning. Taken as a whole, there are six language description breakdowns explaining these.

The prefix used in English is not always the same one used in Portuguese even if both exist in the two languages. For example, the prefixes *-in* and *-dis* are present in Portuguese and English. However, when one of these prefixes is used in one of the languages, another prefix might be applied. Examples are the English word *inhuman*, which is *deshumano* in Portuguese, the English word *unimaginable* in Portuguese is *inimaginável*, the English word *unwanted* in Portuguese can be *indesejado* and the Portuguese equivalent for the English word *unreal* is *irreal*. So it is understandable when the Portuguese student of English says *dishuman* (or *deshuman*) instead of *inhuman*, or *inimaginable* rather than *unimaginable*. All of these prefixes exist in both languages except for the prefix *-un*, which is only present in English.

Another situation has to do with the prefixes *-un* and *-mis* that do not exist in Portuguese. The word *unusual* could be translated as *invulgar* or by adding the negation to the root word as in *não usual*. The word *usual* exists in Portuguese and has the same meaning as the English word *usual*, but in Portuguese does not take a prefix. To express *unusual* using the Portuguese word *usual* would be *não usual*. The prefix *-mis* does not exist in Portuguese, either. The words *misinform* and *misinterpret*, for example, would be translated as *informar mal* and *interpretar mal*, respectively.

The problem with these variances is that students will do a lot of different combinations since they do not realize which word formation situations are different and which are similar in both languages. The word *impatient* might become *unpatient* even though the Portuguese translation is very similar – *impaciente*.

Another difference is when the Portuguese and English words take the same or similar looking prefixes but the meanings of these words are theoretically similar but dissimilar in practice. The word *dislike* in English means to not like something or someone. The Portuguese word *desgostar* (*des* + *gostar*) is first translated as displeasure or dissatisfaction. Um *desgosto de amor* means displeasure with a love relationship. However, the Portuguese word *desgostar* also means to not like. In English it is common to say, “I dislike something”, while in Portuguese

it is not customary to say “Eu desgosto ...”. Instead, the negation form is used as in “*Eu não gosto*”.

Another example taken from the sample exercise is the word *disrespect*. In Portuguese the word *desrespeito* exists and has the same meaning, but in practice the phrase “They disrespected me” might more commonly be translated as “*Eles faltaram-me ao respeito*” instead of “*Eles desrespeitaram-me*”. Other examples include the word *illogical* translated to Portuguese as *ilógico*, but normally what is said is “*não é lógico*”. The sentence: “They are unlike each other” would probably be translated as “*São diferentes*” or “*Não são semelhantes*” instead of using the Portuguese word combination *semelhante* + prefix *-dis* as in “*São dessemelhantes/dissemelhantes*”.

Like in every language, the Portuguese speaker expresses certain ideas differently than in English. What we have are “seemingly” English fixed expressions to the Portuguese speaker, although they are not in fact considered fixed expressions. The statement: “They are unlike each other” might seem strange to the Portuguese learner of English since to express this idea in Portuguese, she/he would say: “*Não são iguais*” rather than “*São dessemelhantes/dissemelhantes*”. So getting the student to begin to use the word in this context can sometimes turn out to be a forced situation. If the instructor gets the student to accept these word formation combinations as a kind of “fixed expression”, a translation method can safely be applied to get the student to compare and contrast these different ways of expressing ideas in the two languages. Learners of English often accept and apply idiomatic expressions, for example, correctly and unquestionably, since these are understood as fixed expressions.

Finally, there are many words that take prefixes in English, but do not have an equivalent word in Portuguese. In other words, the word simply does not exist in Portuguese. The word *underweight* can be translated as *debaixo do peso*, the word *overcharge* could be translated to *levar dinheiro a mais* and the word *uncooked* as *por cozinhar* or *cru*, the latter meaning raw.

The word formation plus prefix was separated into nine groups (3 simple ones and 6 more complex items). And of course, there are others that may not totally fit into these groups and can be considered loose ends, or others that are part of a group but are slightly different.

If we return to the initial exercise plan at the beginning of the English exercise sample, one of the aims is to revise already learnt language. Translation exercises requiring conversion from the native language to the non-native one are considered to be one of the most difficult kinds of language exercises since to do these, students need to have had a fair amount of language input so that at least the second language is recognizable. At the same time, they are not repetitive type of revision exercises such as the ones students have done repeatedly in secondary school. And although students may think they know the language (since language training has taken up at least 7 years of their academic background), a somewhat advanced level exercise can remind them that they do indeed need to revise and, more importantly, practice to be able to apply it in language production.

Another aim included was to deepen knowledge of word formation. This method obviously is one of the most adequate exercises to dismember word formation and thereby deepening ones knowledge. Comparison and contrast between both languages is both embedded and unambiguous as these are seen and analyzed side by side.

Another aim mentioned is to break bad habits. If students have spoken out the incorrect English word *dishuman* (from the Portuguese word *deshumano*) rather than the correct English word *inhuman*, for, let us imagine, at least 3 of the 7 years or more during language training at high school, it has obviously become part of their English communication baggage and is used over and over again. Repetition leads to habit forming and possibly results in fossilization. Again, a comparison-contrast exercise that is challenging and different from those done in high school may at least help to break bad habits. Hence the methodology adopted for this exercise can be justified by factors that have led students to make the same mistakes time after time.

D. ECS German language subject

1. Students' language background training and the German language subject

Due to the secondary school curricula in Portugal, ECS students usually do not have the chance to study German and consequently do not have any related background training and preparation. ECS students start at beginner's level, and in two years they are supposed to reach a B1 level. Since the aim of their language studies is to be able to follow classes at a German University, they need to acquire general survival German and some German for Academic Purposes in the specific area of Computer Science.

German is going to be generally their third foreign language, having started with English and then learned either French or Spanish as second foreign languages. This means that students beginning to learn another foreign language have already gained experience. In learning, understanding and using a new language, they know they can actively resort to languages previously learned. If the language to be learned is in a certain way similar, they are in the same language family. Most new foreign words are English loan words, but like English the language also contains a lot of foreign words with Greek or Latin roots which are not often recognized as "foreign" any more. (There are lots of similar words in German and English as for example: *Apfel* – *apple* or *Tiger* – *tiger*). This recourse can be helpful and should be taken in account. Previous foreign language learning experiences should not be ignored or left unexploited.

If possible, vocabulary or grammatical structures can be compared and contrasted, especially in beginner's classes. The idea that intelligent guessing is worth a try before looking up a word in the dictionary gives students confidence and they realize that they have to learn much difficult German grammar before being able to understand something.

"Der Mann kann gut schwimmen." This sentence could be pre-translated as: *"The man can swim good."* and is not far from the correct translation: *"The man can swim well."*

2. Using translation in the German language classroom

When learning German, the use of translation can be an important means of stressing differences between languages and clarifying uncommon grammar structures to the learner. An example one can name is the problematic word order in the German language. Word order is an element of syntax. German syntax is more flexible than English syntax and depends more on case (Nominative, Dative, and Accusative) and case endings for clarity. In German, the subject may not always come first in a sentence. In subordinate (dependent) clauses, the conjugated verb must be at the end of the clause. It is only natural that students think in their mother tongue when they begin to learn German. But the number one mistake is thinking too literally and translating word-for-word.

To make the peculiarity of the German word order clear, both languages (German and English and even Portuguese) can be compared in contrast and even a word-to-word translation can be carried out to stress the differences between languages:

Ich muss morgen um 8 Uhr nach Lissabon fahren. (German)

I must go _____ to Lisbon. (English)

Eu tenho que _____ a Lisboa. (Portuguese)

Then one can explain to students: “Look, the crazy Germans say: I must _____ to Lisbon go” (or in Portuguese “Eu tenho que _____ a Lisboa ir”.) and any time the mistake occurs one can say: “Remember what those crazy people say?!?”

This word-for-word translation has shown to be of great help, and a more effective memo technique than the visual support.

| 1 | 2 1 st part of the verb | 3 | 4 | 5 2 nd part of the verb |
|-------------|--|-------------|-------------|--|
| Der Zug | Kommt | aus München | um 8 Uhr | an. |
| Aus München | Kommt | der Zug | um 8 Uhr | an. |
| Um 8 Uhr | Kommt | der Zug | aus München | an. |

There are many other things that make German “hard”, but the “hard” aspects can be skipped at this level because grammar points are less essential for communication and can be dealt with later for perfection. This way energy should be focused on the right things at the right time encouraging students to speak and read, to use as much of the language as possible, even to make mistakes and point out which ones are less serious mistakes as students will not be advanced speakers of German in this short learning period. This language course is aimed at beginner to intermediate learners who are struggling with basic grammar and vocabulary.

Introductory German taught in the students own language can be very helpful. Analytically oriented learners often favor translation as an aid to learning. Coincidentally this happens to be a common trait amongst engineering students. Most of their studies are analytically oriented.

Translation is also a real life communicative activity. Students translate in class for peers, and translate instinctively into an interim usually uncontrolled by the instructor since it is part of their means of acquiring a language. Being exposed to it in one’s own language and learning the basic grammar before getting immersed in its complexity will make the overall experience a little less demanding.

Although some technical terminology related to computer science is presented, the main focus is on survival German and getting students to ideally reach B1 level. It would be

unrealistic to focus too much on technical terminology because most Portuguese students have not had any prior German language training. So it is a mishmash of general, academic and survival German language learning.

E. ECS French language subject

In Europe, French is an official language in Belgium, France, Luxembourg and Switzerland. The European Computer Science course includes France in its protocol. Every year these students choose to go to either Blois or Metz to do their final year and in these universities the teaching language is French.

1. Students' language background training and the French language subject

Most high school graduates have had at least 3 years of French instruction. Many of the students who choose French over German, though, have either lived in France as Portuguese emigrants or consider the French language easier than German because it is a Latin language like Portuguese.

Students' beginning language levels start at A1 and move up progressively to B1 levels. Workloads are the same as for German: 4 contact hours per week for 2 years. It is therefore not an unrealistic goal to take students to B1 levels.

The focus of language training is on academic, general and survival French, but also on technical French. Contrary to English, technical terms in French are part of the subject syllabus. Translation approach is used to present these terms to students.

Like in Portugal, in France there are also a substantial number of English words written in programming due to the presence of program instructions in French texts. Unlike Portugal, though, the highly specialized computer terms are confined to professional circles and not to the general public. Most technical terms in computer science in France have a French translation.

Governments have set up public agencies to make recommendations to the general public and professionals about terminology in general offering French translations of new words from English (see General Commission of Terminology and Neology Order Line No. 96-602 of 3 July 1996 on the enrichment of the French language). Computer terminology is no exception. It includes, in particular, terms related to concepts, techniques, standards, products, software and hardware, as well as practical applications and business computing.

Therefore, students who are going to study computer science in a French university must know the technical terms related to their technological subject in French. This is why computer science technical terms are given special attention in the French language subject. However, often terms are translated from English into French, rather than from Portuguese into French since Portuguese students are often more familiar with English computer science terms than the Portuguese ones.

2. Using translation tools to teach technical language in the French language classroom

Given this stance, students choosing the French language will have a mix of general, academic and technical French for computer science purposes. The aim is B1 level and the technical terms using a translation approach are illustrated in the following part.

3. French exercise sample

a. Language exercise plan

Language goals: To familiarize students with technical terms in the area of Computer Science.

Language focus: Technical language vocabulary

Language teaching methodology: Translation from L2/L1 English/Portuguese into L2/L3 (Second or third language)

b. French exercise sample

| English term / Termo em português | | Terme technique français |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Hardware | ---- | Hadware |
| Website | ---- | Site Web |
| Megabytes | ---- | Méga octet |
| Email | ---- | Mél, Courriel |
| Download | Descarregar | Téléchargement |
| Upload | ----- | Transfert Montant |
| Computer | Computador | Ordinateur |
| Software | ----- | Logiciel |

c. Explanation

We chose the abovementioned terms because they look nothing like the English or even the Portuguese versions. For example, the French term for *logiciel* (meaning software) looks nothing like the word software.

The sample exercise list above is not extensive since teaching vocabulary in list-form should not be exhaustive but provided in small doses. However, it does give us an idea of how different the technical terms are. Furthermore, it says something about the French culture, in that they attempt to preserve their national identity. Portuguese, on the other hand, may be more flexible to foreign imports. Then again, while French versions of technological-related vocabulary are available to French scholars and to the general public, in Portugal this is not the case.

IV. Final Remarks

Proficiency of at least three languages in today's global world is not an unreal or unreasonable goal for our future professionals. This research work has focused on future computer science

engineers who intend on working and living abroad. In order for these professionals to be able to succeed with confidence, they should be prepared to deal with cultural, educational, social and ethnic diversity.

As language teachers in a transnational university course in Portugal, we have the responsibility to help prepare our students for the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity that awaits them. This paper has aimed at showing how we attempt to accomplish this goal. We first need to understand where our students are coming from. We are interested in knowing their language backgrounds and current knowledge. In addition, it is crucial to know the reality that surrounds these individuals, both linguistically and culturally. The few examples in this paper pointed out that the Portuguese students have two mandatory languages in secondary school, which are usually 7 years of English and 3 years of French. We then need to know where they are going.

Once we are informed of the past and future, we commit ourselves in doing the best we can to give them the training they need to thrive. We hope that the examples illustrated in the paper show how important multilingualism and multiculturalism are for our future professionals in technological domains. Teaching approaches that involve comparing and contrasting languages and cultures are obviously an ideal option. The example we illustrated in this paper is the method of translation in the language classroom. In order to help our students succeed, we could set an example by applying multilingualism in classes, thus showing them that, as world citizens, we must all become part of this very multi-faceted global world.

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Language and Teaching Materials in ELT: An EIL Approach

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Abstract | The current cultural, functional and linguistic multiplicity associated with the English language has led to the pressing need not only to reassess essential notions in English Language Teaching (ELT), but also to reconsider traditional pedagogical practices.

Until now, for instance, the decision regarding which instructional variety should be used in a curriculum was generally made without much thought; the choice was mainly centered on already previously established concepts or on the status quo (with particular prominence being given to Standard British or American English). But, when considering the present use of English as an international language, several aspects should be further considered as well, namely: students' needs and goals, teachers' capability and accessible resources.

The aim of this article is therefore to introduce readers to central issues like language diversity in ELT (not only in terms of native speaker varieties, but also regarding the need to develop communication skills for different communicative situations), and the importance of adapting and creating teaching materials for classroom use. Regarding the latter issue, particular reference is made to creating materials for effective language learning, as well as to how an international perspective can be incorporated into ELT materials so as to prepare students to communicate successfully in a variety of contexts.

Key words | English as an international language, English language teaching, varieties of English, teaching materials

1. Introduction

Due to the lack of solid statistical information and the existing vagueness in defining the notion of “English users”, estimating the exact number of the English speakers at a global level is an especially arduous task. Several numbers have been proposed by various researchers, but the most well-known researcher is perhaps Crystal (2003), who estimates that there are approximately 1.1 to 1.8 billion users of English around the world, of which only 320 to 380 million are native speakers of the language. Ten years later, these numbers have already increased by far, especially when considering the continuous ascending trend in the number of English learners in the last decades.

Numbers alone, however, do not give us an understanding of the extensive and pervasive use of English. The variety of different roles and domains in which it is used also need to be contemplated, particularly regarding business, higher education, the entertainment industry, the Internet and transportation. In addition, Crystal also argues that “a language achieves a genuinely global status” (3) when its unique role is also acknowledged in nations where it is mainly not spoken as the general population’s mother tongue.

A particularly relevant model that grasps the types of spread, patterns of acquisition and functions English takes on in each country is Kachru’s Concentric circle model (Kachru, “Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism”). This model allows for a general understanding of the different functions English assumes around the world by means of three concentric circles – the Inner, Outer and Expanding circle. The first one refers to countries where English is the first language of the majority of the inhabitants, the second one is applied to countries where English assumes the role of a second language (L2) and the latter, to countries where it is mainly used as a foreign language.

In addition to its role in separate countries, English has also attained an important position worldwide where it is viewed as the most common and shared language of contact between people from varied cultural, linguistic, and national settings. Moreover, the progresses in faster and cheaper means of transportation and communication, and the increasing use of the

Internet, have likewise played an important role in establishing a variety of opportunities for using English in an array of multicultural and multilingual settings.

Considering these issues, the present sociolinguistic situation is characterized as being uniquely diverse, therefore, complicating how ELT can and should be approached. From a traditional point of view, the English that is taught is customarily viewed as being “a more static and monolithic entity” (Matsuda 3); however, due to its global use, localized varieties of the language have appeared in order to adjust to new sociolinguistic and sociocultural environments (Kachru, “Models for non-native Englishes”). It may therefore be argued that the ideal of a single standard and fixed variety does not exist in reality, subsisting only in the prescriptive rules of grammar books. In real use, language changes in time and is inherently unstable. Bearing in mind this fact, Graddol reiterates that “[English is no longer] English as we have known it, and have taught it in the past as a foreign language” but “a new phenomenon” (11) known as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or even as English as an International Language (EIL).¹

As a result, there is an increasing need to reconsider ELT when compared to other foreign languages, especially due to its international nature. As McKay argues, “the teaching and learning of an international language must be based on a . . . different set of assumptions than the teaching and learning of any other second or foreign language” (McKay, “Teaching English as an International Language” 11). Due to the variety of linguistic forms, functions and profiles of English users in ELT, Matsuda has likewise put forth several pressing issues, which need to be addressed, namely: 1) who should be the “model” English speaker in ELT; 2) which English variety should be adopted as the instructional model; and 3) which culture should embody an English-speaking culture.

Considering these issues, several are the factors that need to be reassessed, especially those related to classroom practices, and learners’ and teachers’ attitudes (e.g. Sharifan 2009), which play a vital role in preparing effective English language users.

In view of all these aspects, the main focus of this paper is to introduce pre-service and even in-service teachers to relevant issues which need much reflection, namely the dilemma of

which instructional variety should be selected for the classroom, its consequent effects in creating suitable language learning/teaching materials and lastly, how an international perspective of English can be incorporated into ELT materials.

2. Selecting an Instructional Variety: Towards an International Perspective

When organizing an English language course, deciding on a specific instructional variety of English is essential, as it will guide the various parts of a curriculum in both oral and written production. However, current trends in ELT syllabus design appear to make little provision for the existing linguistic diversity. According to Cogo and Dewey, there still continues to be the widely held assumption that language-teaching norms can be centrally determined and universally applied (172). In fact, in practice, the tendency is for decisions to be hastily made by teachers who usually take into consideration prior concepts already implemented or the established *status quo*. Standard British or American English are therefore the two most chosen varieties,² as they are recognized as the “established” varieties with the most importance and legitimacy in the majority of international situations.

Although both varieties are legitimate options, ideally, language practitioners should also consider the present day use of English as the main idiom employed in transnational settings – at national, European and global levels. By restricting students’ contact to a limited range of varieties, they never actually have the opportunity to acknowledge the reality of most communicative exchanges, which by and large take place among interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Assuming that contact situations are characterized as being highly unpredictable, the variety/ies that is/are used in each circumstance depend/s on those taking part in the communicative interaction, especially when considering that each person uses the variety they are most familiar with.

Consequently, it may also be argued that there is no distinct variety that can be used successfully in every communicative context, as most communicative situations are fluctuating and unstable. Only if there were to exist a single stable community, would an international

variety of English arise; however, in practice this is highly improbable. For that reason, instead of centering one's attention only on a specific variety, attention should also be placed on how to overcome the different linguistic barriers that may emerge when communicating with others. In order to do so, one important issue to learn is how participants can converge towards their interlocutors as communication progresses. According to Jenkins (2000) this can be done by acquiring and developing several accommodation skills and communicative strategies which are essential, namely: drawing on extralinguistic cues, gauging interlocutors' linguistic repertoires, supportive listening, signaling non-comprehension in a face-saving way, asking for repetition, paraphrasing, and clarifying requests so that participants can check, monitor and clarify their understanding. These strategies not only contribute to raising students' awareness to existing accommodation skills, but also prove how different English varieties can be used in achieving effective intercultural communication.

For that reason, regardless of the dominant variety chosen by the teacher, it is necessary learners' realize that it is only one of many others they may encounter once outside the classroom. By exposing them to different varieties, students will be able to understand the existing linguistic diversity within the English language and become familiar with other cultures as well. Providing students with the opportunity to interact with English users who have had different linguistic and cultural experiences is therefore essential for the learning experience. Having a diverse international teaching staff or guest visitors (both national or from abroad) is one option, but another one may also involve exchange programs with students from abroad. Even if those exchanges are simply restricted to Internet communities and social network services (e.g. blogs, Facebook, Moodle, YouTube), the aim is for them to effectively and actively contribute to a network, and to communicate with other peers.

A practical example of this is the role that the European Commission has had in supporting exchanges at a European level with several programs, of which the Comenius Program is included. The main aim of the Comenius Program (European Commission), which focuses on all levels of school education, is to help young people and educational staff to better

understand the range of European cultures, languages and values. In addition, funding is likewise available in terms of actions related to school education, such as:

- **School partnerships**, which enable school co-operation and class exchanges in different European countries. These partnerships not only contribute to foreign language learning, but also promote intercultural awareness. Moreover, they also play an important role in creating positive attitudes towards learning among students, and in developing new and collaborative teaching approaches among teachers;
- **Regio partnerships**, which consist in bilateral partnerships between school authorities of different regions. The main aim is essentially to enrich the educational offer to students in the participating regions;
- **eTwinning** – an Internet platform for teachers and schools, which takes advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet and digital media. In addition, it also contributes to promote school cooperation, collaborative learning and project based pedagogy at a European level.

With these types of programs, both teachers and learners interact with people from different countries. Accordingly, these experiences not only contribute to raising one's awareness towards how English is spoken differently around Europe, but also to developing one's accommodation skills (especially regarding the comprehension of different accents, among other issues).

Another approach that may likewise be taken into account when choosing a variety, and which is probably the most accessible one for teachers, includes the teaching materials made available (e.g. CDs, textbooks, videos and ELT websites). However, despite the general acknowledgement that it has become a widely distributed and linguistically diverse language, there is very little information on material development for teaching English from an international perspective. For that reason, learning how to adapt or select already existing materials, and how

to design original ELT resources is vital when developing a class syllabus.

As Seidlhofer puts it, “what is crucial therefore is not *what* teaching materials are used but *how* they are used” (201).

3. Rethinking Teaching Materials for an International Perspective

Over the years, ELT processes and teaching materials have gone through several changes regarding both grammar and culture. While in the 1940s and 1950s materials focused primarily on grammatical issues, in the 1960s there was a shift towards a more social perspective of language. Later in the 1970s, from a sociolinguistic point of view, Hymes (1972) presented several issues worth considering when observing language use, namely possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performance, which brought important implications for ELT. According to him, standards of correctness should be observed in language use, as well as in issues of language appropriateness. As a result, textbooks began to be arranged according to social situation and/or language function, in which particular emphasis was given on the surface to language use and language appropriateness, while grammatical issues were camouflaged in the dialogs written to exemplify and practice specific grammatical structures (McKay, “Teaching Materials”). Up to this day, this continues to be the most common practice in the majority of the published ELT textbooks.

As for culture, reference in this area usually lies on the literature, customs and holidays of English-speaking countries, especially from the United Kingdom and the United States, with occasional references made to Australia or Canada. This longtime emphasis on the British and/or American culture is greatly owed to both countries’ dominant role in the ELT book-publishing scene.

Regardless of these issues, teaching materials have always played a key role in ELT, and the current profusion of resources reveals the extent to which both institutions and teachers take into account published work to mold their teaching methods and goals. Rubdy, for instance, refers to some of the benefits of using published materials (cf. 39-40):

- Textbooks offer a feeling of security and self-confidence in teachers;
- They provide certainty and structure which promotes a sense of safety in in-classroom contact;
- They are presented as a “direction map” for both teachers and learners to follow;
- And they may also serve as agents of change by persuading teachers to adjust their traditional teaching approaches.

Nonetheless, taking on an exclusively textbook oriented approach nowadays does not quite meet the expectations of the majority of the communicative interactions. In addition, due to the increasing number of English speakers, especially in terms of macroacquisition³ (Brutt-Griffler 14), various implications may also emerge in the development of materials with an international perspective of the language. In view of these issues, the question that persists is: in what way can teachers adapt their materials and curriculum so as to undertake a more EIL perspective?

To begin with, and as previously mentioned, English is now more varied than ever before, and it is especially through contemporary literature that distinct English features are clearly visible in the grammatical norms and lexical use (many of which have been studied – e.g. V.S. Naipaul or J.M. Coetzee, to name just a few). However, when observing these variations in language teaching and in teaching materials, much less has been written about the issue. If one of the main aims in ELT is to prepare learners for intercultural communicative communication, it is essential they recognize the existing diversity of English standards. One suggestion, which may help support this point view, is to make reference to something that is familiar to the students in question. For instance, Portuguese (like English) is also an international language with a number of varieties (e.g. European Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese, among others); so, teachers may take advantage of this reality students are familiarized with, and explain how English is similarly structured. This type of exercise may be put into practice by taking a variety of different texts from authors who write or

speak in English, so as to establish an understanding of how the language is structured differently around the world. Despite being a useful and valuable approach, many of the times it is often neglected, as textbook oriented classes are mainly centered on the single standard variety developed in the book.

As for culture, the majority of textbooks from English-speaking countries are predominantly centered on the two main cultures, the British and American culture; although, occasional references may be found to other Inner circle countries as well (e.g. the Australian or Canadian cultures). Nevertheless, culture is not merely restricted to iconic symbols; it is also essentially centered on how individuals communicate with each other in a specific setting; therefore, the importance of pragmatics, where context contributes to meaning.

Context is likewise crucial in teaching materials, as interaction is predominantly centered between native speakers, and so with scarce examples from L2 speaker interactions. This is not only true for materials developed in English-speaking countries, but it is also visible in textbooks from countries traditionally believed as part of the Expanding circle. In order to counteract this fact, McKay believes language practitioners may complement the dialogs and texts in the textbooks with their own written texts and dialogs portraying L2-L2 interactions (“Teaching Materials” 77). By doing so, not only are they demonstrating the existence of a broader diversity of English users, but they are also contributing to students’ understanding of intercultural communication.

A “classroom-based social research” approach, as suggested by Peirce (26), may also be seen as an alternative tactic for both teachers and students regarding materials. In this case, the aim is centered on the students’ ability to engage in a collaborative project, gathering examples of L2 interaction within their own local community, be it person-to-person contact or English used on the web; while teachers contribute as well with audio examples of their own. With this type of an approach, learners get to contact with other L2 speakers from an array of social and cultural backgrounds, which would be impossible if simply restricted to the classroom and textbook.

By taking on approaches similar to these, emphasis is placed on linking classroom language learning with actual language use outside of the school environment. In other words, the learning process only begins in the classroom and continues afterwards outside of school when contacting with different language users.

In view of this, the use of authentic material is essential in the language learning process. However, in classroom contexts, the use of the term “authentic” does not apply to materials developed for non-pedagogic reasons in other communities of users (e.g. a restaurant menu from the UK); it refers to texts that assume a specific communicative purpose for a group and with which that particular group can “engage with and create discourse around for the purpose of furthering their language learning” (McKay, “Teaching Materials” 80). Bearing this in mind, when deciding on which materials should be used for a course, language practitioners should reflect on: 1) whether the materials chosen are appropriate for the learners of that particular context and if they motivate them, 2) if they contribute to developing language proficiency, and 3) if they are applicable for the specific classroom and social context (80).

Much may be done in this area, as Matsuda and Duran (2012) suggest when implementing an international perspective of English into ELT classrooms. According to them, a variety of practical lessons and activities can be applied at different language levels. These lessons and activities range from introduction to World Englishes, to different varieties and language attitudes, local creativity, culture and writing. With simple everyday materials (e.g. worksheets, Internet access, dictionaries, a white board, a computer and a projector), new activities can be developed and implemented, which prove change is possible when distancing oneself from the textbook.

In view of what has been explored throughout this essay, these are simply some reflections on issues, which still need much deliberation. There is much to be done so as to take a step forward in implementing a more international perspective of English in language teaching environments, especially in what concerns the importance of developing language and cultural awareness.

4. Concluding Remarks

As has been discussed, language practitioners have a crucial role in raising language awareness among learners. If developing effective intercultural communicative agents is one of the central goals in ELT, much still needs to be done so as to distance teaching practices from single varieties and textbook approaches. Supplementary activities and materials can and should be integrated, always bearing in mind the aims of each lesson. McKay therefore argues that when devising a curriculum, teachers should take into account the following issues (“Teaching Materials” 80):

- Are the majority of the students in class prepared to learn this specific feature of the language?
- What do I want my students to learn from the activity and why?
- What topics are of interest to the learners in question?
- How is it possible to create the conditions for learners to engage with a text and/or with other learners so as to encourage language proficiency?

By taking into consideration these issues, teachers foster a learning process that contributes to the development of competent users of English, who not only are aware of the diversity of the language, but who will also recognize the local features of the language and culture when communicating in multicultural communicative settings.

Notes

¹ The terms English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL) will be used interchangeably in this essay, meaning “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer 7).

² Taking into account the official English language curriculum in Portugal as an example, the great majority of references given are from the United Kingdom or from the United States, although the former is in advantage when compared to the latter. Therefore, if a teacher is to follow the list of references given, the decision is clearly biased towards one of these two varieties.

³ The term macroacquisition refers to individuals who acquire English as an additional language in their own country.

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A Theoretical Matrix to Approach Literary Texts in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract | This article is based on my report for the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the New University of Lisbon which accounted for my Supervised Teaching Practice of English and German at the German School of Lisbon. In it the advantages of using a theoretical matrix when working with literary texts in a foreign language classroom are listed. After the necessary review of relevant research, the blueprint of one such matrix is put forth. With the Reader Response Theory as its cornerstone, it sets out to develop textual competences, reading strategies and interpretation and critical analysis skills through a management of the learner-readers' responses. This approach is best embodied by a multifaceted treatment of scrupulously chosen literary texts which should be oriented by a few guiding principles. Such treatment implies not only an open yet moderated discussion of the text but also a number of procedures which rely on different interaction patterns and promote the development of different skills and competences. The article ends with a short summary and discussion of some lessons which illustrate this theory in practice.

Key words | language teaching, literary text, Reader Response Theory, theoretical matrix, textual competence

It has been said of Boehme that his books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning. The remark may have been intended as a sneer at Boehme, but it is an exact description of all works of literary art without exception.

Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry. A Study of William Blake*

Literature in a Foreign Language Classroom: Benefits and Commonly-held Perceptions

Before addressing the question of whether there is a need for a theoretical matrix for literary texts in teaching, it is essential to briefly account for the unfortunately nonconsensual importance of literary texts in a foreign language classroom. Their benefits have been duly noted and thoroughly listed elsewhere (e.g. Short and Candlin 91-92; Bausch, Christ, and Krumm 150; Mealha and Falcão 193-196; Fenner 16-19). Brumfit and Carter, for instance, have identified some of the most frequently cited advantages, among them being the fact that literary texts are authentic and highly suitable both for the discussion of content and for more careful analyses of language in use (15). Meanwhile, Kramersch points to other equally noteworthy merits, such as learner motivation. The “appeal to the students’ emotions”, interest and memory stands out, as does “the voice of a writer” and its “ability . . . to appeal to the particular in the reader” (131).

Granted that the foreign language classroom stands to gain from an appropriate use of literary texts, how should they be dealt with? Since any teacher working in a member state of the European Union should take the precepts of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) into account, this is an obvious starting point when looking for general parameters. The paragraph of CEFR which pays homage to the undeniable importance of literature for the learning of languages and cultures gives some hints but nothing concrete

(89). Besides, according to the CEFR, which touts the Communicative Approach, this approach should be “action-oriented” – indeed, the “task” deserves an entire chapter (157-167) – and should focus on the development of “general” as well as “communicative language competences” (Council of Europe 9). The Communicative Approach itself reinforces this notion; its priority is above all the promotion of the development of a “functional language ability” (Byram, *Routledge Encyclopedia* 125).

This emphasis in “action” and “tasks” in no way runs counter to the use of literary texts in language teaching, on the contrary: as we shall see, the reader actually plays a very active role (see e.g. Neuner, Krüger, and Grewer 47), which requires a great deal more of participation in the construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of meanings than is apparent at first sight. Unfortunately, however, this perception, relatively consensual in the academic world, is often at odds with the actual teaching practice. In common parlance, it is arguably rather unusual to see concepts like “functional” and “action” linked to “reading”.

Perhaps with behaviourist inklings seasoning their reasoning, or overwhelmed by the increasingly uncompromising demands of a system obsessed with “accountability”, many teachers are over-reliant on overt and immediately observable behaviours and thus partial to what Pachler and Allford called a “[s]cepticism about the practical linguistic usefulness of the study of literature” (238). Unwarranted though such a notion may be, it is easy enough to understand from where its reasoning stems. One needs only to think of lyrical poetry. As Widdowson has demonstrated with wit and simplicity, any given lyrical poem, for all its aesthetic potential, does not say anything much, nor is there anything “worthy of comment” going on (133).

Moreover, even when necessity overcomes reluctance and literature has its day in a foreign language classroom, it may be disingenuously used for other ends. Language teachers, who are sometimes ill-prepared to deal with the intricacies of literary texts (Kramersch 137), often seem to be reluctant to probe such depths and prefer to use the text as an excuse to deal with its historical context or language structures, thus eschewing an actual engagement with the text itself. This tendency has been termed “flight from the text” (Short and Candlin 89).

The consequences of this rather philistine approach to literary texts are considerable, as Pachler and Allford have pithily observed: “The current utilitarian rationale for MFLs has tended to stress not just communicative skills but oral communication at the expense of reading in general and the study of literature in particular” (237). Portmann-Tselikas and Schmöler-Eibinger also pointed out how “Im klassischen kommunikativen Fremdsprachen-unterricht geht es primär um sprachliches Handeln in Situationen des zielsprachlichen Alltags” [‘The classical communicative foreign language lesson deals primarily with the use of the target language in everyday situations’] (10),¹ which leads to a lamentable deficit in substance in detriment of form (10). Without a rich and multi-layered content propitious to the development of an “own voice” (Izarra 8), students can be expected to have little “personal involvement”, which in turn causes their interactions to be forced (Fenner 15). And this, as Long has observed, is quite an unsatisfactory state of affairs: “The teaching of literature is an arid business unless there is a response” (42).

Engaging and Empowering through the Reader Response Theory

Instead of merely providing a definition of what may count as a “response” and risk oversimplification, it should prove more informative to tell the tale of its main proponent, the Reader Response Theory. This theory, which was developed in the 1970’s, rests on the assumption that the reader is the main agent in the construction of meaning of any text, including those said to be “literary”.

Such empowerment of the reader would have been totally unthinkable some decades ago. John Corbett neatly describes the evolution of the academic debate on who has the authority over the meaning of a given text. According to Corbett, as late as in the beginning of the 20th century the author was still the forthright owner of the text’s meaning, and it was up to the reader to find out the “message”. Later, the focus shifted from the author to the text, which now coded the meaning. However, this hardly changed the status quo as far as the reader was concerned, who was at this stage thought to merely decipher the text (169).

Things began to change in 1970, when Hans Robert Jauss pointed the way to “die Entdeckung des Lesers” [‘the discovery of the reader’] (Bischof, Kessling and Krechel 163). In reaction to the marxist and formalist methodologies, Jauss states the following: “Im Dreieck von Autor, Werk und Publikum ist das letztere nicht nur der passive Teil, keine Kette bloßer Reaktionen, sondern selbst wieder eine geschichtsbildende Energie” [‘In the triangle of author, work and audience, the latter is not just a passive party, no chain of mere reaction, but indeed a history-creating energy’] (169). Jauss, who introduced the concept of “Rezeptionsästhetik”, or “Reception Aesthetics”, went still farther in his ground-breaking defence of the reader as agent (as opposed to empty vessel) by categorically claiming that the reader-agent is critical to the historical existence of texts (169).

Wolfgang Iser also expanded the horizons of literary theory by introducing, in his 1972 book *Der implizite Leser*, the concept of the “implicit reader”, that is, the *sine qua non* element which underlies each and every literary work (8). Not only does Iser unequivocally attribute the “Sinnkonstitution des Textes” [‘creation of meaning of the text’] to the reader (7), but he also goes as far as to claim, in his later book *Der Akt des Lesens*, that “Texte [gewinnen] erst im Gelesenwerden ihre Realität” [‘texts come to be only once they are read’] (61). Besides, Iser, like Jauss, is clearly drawing attention to the active nature of reading when he considers “das Lesen als Prozeß einer dynamischen Wechselwirkung von Text und Leser” [‘reading as a process of dynamic interaction between text and reader’], as well as when he discusses the “Kreativität der Rezeption” [‘creativity of reception’] (*Der Akt des Lesens*, 176).

According to “Reception Aesthetics”, meaning is not inherent to any text; rather, it emanates from the interaction between the text and the reader and, crucially, must be meaningful to the reader (Bischof, Kessling and Krechel 163, 20). Despite this, and bearing in mind the scope of this paper (the foreign language classroom), it may not be very constructive to perceive reading, as does the poet Hans Magnus Enzenberger, as “ein anarchischer Akt” [‘an anarchical act’] in which “der Leser . . . hat immer recht” [‘the reader . . . is always right’] (qtd. in Bremerich-Vos 23). Even though the text can only be said to fully manifest itself as such

“through the reader’s voice” (Matos 57), here it would perhaps be more fruitful to consider that relationship as being dialectic, one in which the text “creates its reader”, who, in turn, attributes meaning to the text (Kramersch 7). The foreign language teacher, therefore, should ensure the occurrence of that “synthesis” and the creation of a “third space” (Matos 60), which is enabled by the ambiguity characteristic of many literary texts (Matos 59; Bischof, Kessling and Krechel 20).

Between Theory and Practice: The Conception of a Theoretical Matrix

This brings us to the next logical step: how to achieve all this? How to make good use in a foreign language classroom of all the benefits that literary texts can afford? Which principles could or should guide the teachers in the making of a didactic unit which revolves around literary texts? What kind of methodologies and procedures can serve these purposes? This paper advocates the use of a theoretical matrix, be it adapted from elsewhere or of one’s own making, in order to address these issues.

Bausch, Christ and Krumm highlight a crippling predicament inherent to the teaching of literature in foreign language classrooms: although it must show that it can be useful to achieve the foreign language learning objectives, it seems that inevitably “stößt jeder Versuch einer Operationalisierung von Lernzielen sehr schnell an Grenzen” [‘every attempt at putting learning objectives into practice quickly runs into obstacles’] (150). Admittedly, the complexity intrinsic to the teaching/learning process is such that any attempt to encapsulate it in didactics or methodologies which aim at a neat universality is a pipe dream doomed to failure (Kramersch 2). The particular school context, for instance, is a quintessential element without the consideration of which it is hard to imagine a successful teaching practice.

This does not mean that teaching should be left to chance and intuition. On the contrary, it is vital that teaching practices, like all tasks expected to be even marginally based on scientific precepts, be backed by coherent and structured thought validated by research in the relevant field. In teaching, that includes a careful formulation of the objectives and of the means to attain them. As Michael Byram stated, “[t]he advantages to be gained from the formulation of

objectives are those of comprehensiveness, coherence and transparency . . . as well as precision” (*Teaching and Assessing* 56). The implementation of general principles and objectives, which in itself already improves the teacher’s practice (Brumfit and Carter 23), also directly benefits the students, as they have much to gain from a clear formulation of objectives (Pachler and Allford 244). This is why, even beyond the narrower scope of classroom use of literary texts, it is paramount to be “as systematic as possible about the principles with which we operate” (Brumfit and Carter 23).

So which principles should a theoretical matrix stand by? It is argued in this paper that the cornerstone of any approach which concerns literary texts should address the tenets of the Reader Response Theory. The centre of this theory being evidently occupied by the reader, we still need to clarify what exactly is meant by “response”. As a working definition, let us consider it “the interaction that develops between reader and text and between different readers of a common text” (Matos 63). Having determined the objective, we now look for a means to accomplish it.

Even though at first sight it might seem easy to elicit responses from the students, that illusion promptly vanishes as soon as we try to establish what is to be considered a response. Furthermore, if we opt for a more honest although somewhat unsettling formulation of the task at hand, it is necessary to ascertain which responses are to be deemed adequate. It is the teaching world’s worst-kept secret that in many cases students learn not to think for themselves but to guess what the teacher wants them to say (Grigg 57) – a plight, as the writer Günter Grass has observed, that has long haunted literary studies (qtd. in Bremerich-Vos 23). In the theoretical perspective advocated by this paper, it goes without saying that these pitfalls are best avoided.

Nor is it productive, again under the scrutiny of this paper’s specific scope, to see reading as the “act of anarchy” advocated by Hans Magnus Enzenberger. In *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*, where Byram writes about the development of the intercultural competence in the classroom, the author suggests the adoption of

international standards of human rights as a reference in order to “avoid the trap of cultural relativism” (Byram 44, 46), that is, the notion that every cultural practice is acceptable because it should be evaluated solely against the standards of the culture which spawns it. A useful parallel can be drawn here with the students’ responses to a literary text: it is inadmissible to acquiesce in interpretations which obviously go against the textual evidence (e.g. reading Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* as being a comedy), regardless of how “personally meaningful” such an interpretation might be to a given student.

Textual Competence: Providing an Adequate Basis for Responses

Having identified the two extremes as far as response management is concerned, we must strive for a balance, which admittedly can hardly be quantified, and it certainly cannot be expressed in a universal formula suitable for every possible context. However, a vital factor that should always be taken into consideration is the text itself, or more specifically what in the previous paragraph was named “textual evidence”. And the learner-readers can only frame their responses according to the textual evidence if they have refined their “Textkompetenz”, or textual competence. Indeed, Portmann-Tselikas and Schmölder-Eibinger go as far as making a fundamental distinction between “sprachliche Anforderungen” [‘linguistic requirements’] and “textuelle Anforderungen” [‘textual requirements’] (8).

This textual competence is closely related to the more well-known “interpretative and analytical skills” (Matos 63), since literary texts, due to their idiosyncratic nature, “require certain reading strategies, which need to be taught” (Pachler and Allford 244). This point, seemingly a matter of fact, cannot be stressed enough, as a widespread if undeclared assumption seems to systematically undermine teacher-moderated discussions: the idea that students “will in some way ‘catch’ the ability to read appropriately . . . in a fairly random way” (Brumfit and Carter 22). There is nothing “random” about how a literary text is liable to be interpreted, and this must be acknowledged and taken into account when a teacher prepares a class which deals with a literary text.

Hence, how are these skills and competences to be fostered? There is no magic solution for teachers, or at least for those who aim for a reflexive teaching practice. Having said this, such practice only stands to gain from being guided by some general principles.

Prior to anything, the literary text itself must be chosen wisely, and this becomes an easier task once the right criteria are taken into account. Bischof, Kessling, and Krechel (23), Strauss (65) and Kramersch (138-139) have authored relatively comprehensive and, to some extent, mutually complementary lists. In the context of the theoretical matrix described in this paper, one particularly important criterion is that the learner-reader should be able to react to a text “without the mediation of the teacher”, since the discussion of a literary text in the classroom is supposed to be a procedure “which analyses an experience already achieved” (Brumfit and Carter 32).

During that discussion, the teacher should value the students’ responses to the text and handle them always in a constructive way, so as to avoid confusing “reader response with free associations and reactions” (Kramersch 137). A teacher can briefly comment on the response, ask the other students to react to the response, or use it as a springboard to ask other questions. It is perfectly acceptable to steer a discussion in this manner; questions, when adequately formulated, “are an *aid* to a response, leading the learner-reader to get an insight into the text which might not be possible otherwise” (Long 45, original italics). Attention must also be paid to the fact that different students learn in different ways and react differently to texts (Kramersch 127-128), which means that the teacher is expected to resort to various interaction patterns and kinds of tasks and activities.

This theoretical background underpins a matrix of my own making, one that consists of three key concepts which have guided my teaching practice: “*response*”, “*relations*” and “*relevance*”. These concepts were designed to give more consistency to the lesson plans my matrix was meant to inspire. Moreover, by announcing these principles to the students at the beginning of the didactic unit in a clear way, the aim was also to contribute to a greater transparency of my own objectives (Pachler and Allford 244).

Some Guiding Principles: Responses, Relations and Relevance

So what is the purpose of these key concepts? In a nutshell, their role was to be reference points for the exploration of a given literary text and its manifold contexts. The first part of the matrix, which deals with “*responses*” or “*first impressions*”, requires the teacher to help the students deconstruct their first impressions, or at least to raise awareness of how they are forged in a subtle manner and how they can have a negative impact on the critical interpretation of a text.

Then, the discussion of “*relations*” or “*references*” picks apart the myriad network of relations within the text. These can be internal, such as the relations between characters, or between form and content; or external, that is to say, the relationship between the work under analysis and its broader context, the cultural world from which it arises and to which it constantly refers.

Finally, the tenet related to “*relevance*” or “*purpose*” urges not to address a putative “*message*” which is meant to be “*deciphered*”, but rather to put the focus on the multitude of issues the text raises, the exploration of the ideas it suggests in the reader and the management of the emotions provoked by the reading.

The theoretical dimension is of an inestimable value to any approach. Even more decisive for a successful teaching practice, however, is its implementation, that is, the transition from theory to practice, as well as its subsequent dynamic of alternation and mutual improvement. Below follows an account of some lessons which were engineered with this matrix as its beacon.

The First Lesson: “On irony”

In a 90-minute English class for 11th graders aged between 15 and 17, I set out to discuss the ramifications of one single concept, irony. The objectives for this class were: “To reflect on the often unsuspected importance of rhetorical devices in everyday life; to analyse different definitions and interpretations of what irony is, and confront previously held presuppositions; and

to recognise the complexity and richness of irony and its overlapping relationship with sarcasm”.

First, the students were asked if they knew what irony was, and once they had assured me that they had mastered that concept, I asked them if they could think of an ironic situation, which they were to do in pairs. Then, after having been given the lyrics to the song “Ironic” by Alanis Morissette, they were asked to underline all the ironic situations they could find while they listened to the song. Lastly, they were shown some dictionary definitions of the word “irony” and they were asked to review the lyrics of the song, as well as the instances of irony they had thought of in pairs, in light of those definitions. They quickly came to the conclusion that strictly speaking not one of the situations described in the song was ironic, and this epiphany was accompanied by the video of an Ed Byrne skit in which the Irish comedian tells his audience just that. This led to a discussion of the age-old difference between normative and descriptive grammar. In the second lesson, the scope was broadened and the task was to compare and contrast irony with concepts such as sarcasm and satire (examples of which were provided by excerpts from the TV shows *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*). Finally, the students carried out a written task in which they were to engage with one of these concepts in a creative way.

This lesson encapsulated all the main tenets of my matrix. Firstly, the students talked about *first impressions*, that is, their reactions to the text (the examples of ironic situations provided by the students). Secondly, they discussed *references*, or contexts (a commonly-held definition of irony which, though not yet extant in many authoritative dictionaries, is ubiquitous in the media). Finally, the focus shifted to *relevance*, or subtexts (that is to say, the different shades of irony, such as dramatic, verbal, situational and so-called “cosmic” irony).

These lessons were illustrative of the matrix’s potential as well as of its possible shortcomings. Eliciting and working with the learners’ responses improves motivation, and making sense of the complex networks of meaning which sustain certain concepts or result in rather obscure phrasings is the very matter of critical thinking, that much worshipped idol for whom so few sacrifices are ever made.

Yet it is also important to think in more practical terms. When confronted with an exam question on stylistic devices, to what extent can all these reflections on irony be useful? Better yet, to what extent can they be counterproductive, for complicating what had previously been known as simply “the expression of something through its opposite”? And granted that important cognitive aspects of learning may be worked on by helping the students reach the conclusion that there is little or no irony in the lyrics of “Ironic” on their own, to what extent is it wise to use 45 minutes of precious classroom time to get there?

These doubts, worrying as they were, would soon be soothed by sheer numbers: a lesson unit based on this matrix was rounded off by a class test corrected by myself and later also by my supervisor, and the overall final grades were 11% better than in the students’ previous test. That lesson unit, which comprised 37 lessons of 45 minutes and dealt mostly with Nick McDowell’s novel *Twelve*, will be briefly described below.

The Didactic Unit: *Twelve*

Some context is in order before plunging into the lessons proper, and for this reason I have penned the following plot summary of the novel:

Twelve narrates the excesses and ennui of wealthy Upper East Side teenagers, chronicling the five days leading up to New Year’s Eve. White Mike, a 17-year-old whiz kid who is taking a year off before college, is a shadowy drug dealer who, never having been a user himself, navigates in the violent underworld to which Manhattan’s well-off adolescents resort to, having been emotionally neglected by their families and tempted by the ease with which their primal instincts can be satisfied with a roll of bank notes. Deeply affected by the loss of his mother, White Mike must now cope with the death of his cousin Charlie, and the pursuit of his murderer, an unscrupulous dealer who sells the (fictitious) designer drug “Twelve”, leads him to a final showdown at a New Year’s party, despite his non-violent nature. However, former drug user and gun aficionado Claude

unexpectedly storms in and cold-bloodedly kills the drug dealer, along with half a dozen innocent teenagers at the party, before the police shoot him down.

The first 90 minutes of classroom time about *Twelve* focused on *responses*, or “first impressions”. Its secondary objectives, such as reflecting on basic elements such as the topic, the title, the text layout and even the cover, served the general objectives, which expected students to draw conclusions that might prove helpful in the future, when analysing other literary (or even non-literary) texts. Furthermore, it was emphasised from the beginning that the students’ responses to the literary text and to the themes associated with it were going to be not only valued as a means towards an end but also an end in themselves; it was from them that the conclusions of each lesson were to be drawn, as opposed to external interpretations.

It would have been coherent for this matrix which cherishes learner empowerment to allow their responses to dictate the pace of the lesson and decide which secondary aspects should be explored. But that was not the case. I stand by my abovementioned argument that when it comes to textual interpretation and analysis there *is* such a thing as an inadequate response, and that is why responses ought to be moderated. For instance, it would be hardly defensible to claim that White Mike, the novel’s protagonist, is not as complex a character as his friend Molly, when textual evidence suggests precisely the opposite.

This justifies a more interventionist teacher role, which was particularly evident in the first six lessons. In them, close readings of some excerpts and teacher-led discussions were predominant, in an attempt to understand the characters better, the way they interact, and the fact that the narrator, who at first is seemingly objective, upon closer inspection turns out to be rather biased in the way he presents the characters. Yet even in these lessons the learner-readers’ responses were the main driving force, sometimes going along the way hinted at by the teacher and occasionally heading down some road “which was grassy and wanted wear” improvised by the students.

Allotting a large number of discussion-based lessons would not only be pedagogically unsound but quite simply unbearable for a sizeable number of students. Indeed, the foreign language classroom has many reasons to welcome the adoption of “group dynamics”, as their benefits include higher motivation and a “lessening of teacher-centeredness” (Brumfit and Carter 37). This led to the implementation of the first large-scale group work in the eighth class.

As Pachler and Allford remind us, students who deal with authentic texts – that is, texts which were not adapted for them as learners of a foreign language – need specialised “background knowledge” (242) Thus the activity chosen for the group work was the making of posters about the different kinds of drugs and about the radically different laws which regulate its consumption in the USA, where *Twelve* is set, and in Portugal, the reality the students knew best. Having already dealt with the students’ first impressions and having started addressing the text’s internal references (that is, the relations between characters and the events), we thus began exploring the different aspects of the relations between the text itself and the reality to which it alludes – the external references.

The rich panoply of cultural references in *Twelve* are not there to simply establish a relationship between the reader’s universe and the universe of the text, they serve a very specific purpose; the text in general and the plot in particular lose much of their strength, interest and complexity once these references are stripped away – that is to say, ignored by the reader. So a second group work, one with slightly altered group dynamics, addressed not only such *relations* but also *relevance*, or the “why” questions. For example, why is “American Beauty” mentioned on the first page and not later on, or indeed not at all? Provided with a short list of a dozen significant cultural references, the students were to explain theirs to their peers and to try and reason what their contribution to the novel might be.

Later, and after a critical viewing of Michael Moore’s “Bowling for Columbine”, the students were to write a text about Claude, a discreet character who ends up killing several people in a mass shooting. By individually applying their recently bolstered interpretation skills, their task was to make a thorough, text-based description of the character, the ulterior motive of

which being the detection of any warning signs of the looming massacre, thus making sense of some short scenes which otherwise could have been perceived as random, isolated snippets.

Conclusion

In the end, the feedback obtained from the classwork, from the group presentations, from the test related to the novel and from the students themselves, seemed to indicate that an approach based on the precepts of the Reader Response Theory, for all its emphasis on the development of such ineffable competences as those related to interpretation and critical thinking, can indeed have significant and verifiable results in a foreign language classroom, although presumably more markedly so at more advanced levels.

None of this, however, is to say that this particular matrix is the definitive one and should be emulated by all who give credence to the Reader Response Theory. Rather, this article merely sets out to show that when theory is used to truly instigate practice, as opposed to legitimating it in retrospect, then it has the potential to provide a framework which, far from excessively narrowing the scope, can give some precious focus on what may at first seem to be a daunting task, for example the idea of having students teasing out the intricacies of a literary text written in a language that is not their own.

This is all the more important when one considers the paramount role of literary texts in certain foreign language curricula (namely in advanced classes), not to mention some often inescapable external constraints. After all, the average language teacher in Western Europe is trapped between two clashing realities: one in which scholars seem to be consensual in their praise of literary texts as legitimate authentic texts rather unique in their possibilities; and another in which today's unfortunately pervasive and influential mercantilist view of education pushes for a functional, pragmatic, almost philistine teaching practice which yields immediate results in standardised exams. Therefore, in these circumstances, one could do worse than deal with literary texts through a theoretical matrix, thus deftly addressing both the sound precepts which emanate from the academia and the pressing need for practical solutions.

Note

¹ All translations of the quotes provided in the original German are mine.

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