

A recommendation for a new Internet-based environment for studying literature

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Abstract: The effects of information and communication technologies, which are rapidly improving and spreading in the current age, can be seen in the field of training and education as well as in all other fields. Unlike previous technologies, the Internet, which is the concrete compound of those technologies, provides users with the trio of audio, text and visual materials digitally and simultaneously. This new learning environment, which allows users to individually plan the learning process according to their preferences, has been also effective in changing traditional attitudes and habits related to reading. Nowadays, parallel to these changes, it has become necessary to teach literature in a virtual environment, or, at least, to make a connection with that environment. In this study, the authors first discuss the condition of literature on the Internet considering the Internet-literature connection and the features of reading Internet-based literary texts. Then, depending on a literature review, the authors propose a new Internet-based learning environment for teaching literature considering the extent of computer literacy, as defined by Shapiro and Hughes (1996).

Key words: Internet; literature; literacy; teaching literature; learning environment

1. Introduction

As a result of the fast proliferation and improvement of information and communication technologies in every area, new learning environments have emerged in training and education. Unlike previous technologies, the Internet, which is accepted as the concrete compound of these technologies, provides users with the trio of audio, text and visual materials (movie or picture) digitally and simultaneously. This new, multi-channeled and multi-referential environment allows the interaction between human and machine (Lancien, 1998), allows users to individually plan their learning process (Erkunt & Akpınar, 2002), and has changed the traditional attitudes and habits related to reading. Currently, parallel to these changes, it has become necessary to teach literature in a virtual environment, or, at least, to make a connection with that environment. Thus, this study aims at suggesting a new learning environment for the literature courses that are part of the foreign languages teacher-training bachelor's degree programs. In accordance with this purpose, the authors first discuss the condition of literature on the Internet currently, considering the Internet-literature connection and the features of reading Internet-based literary texts. Secondly, depending on a literature review, the authors propose a new Internet-based learning

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environment for teaching literature considering the extent of computer literacy, as defined by Shapiro and Hughes (1996).

2. The Internet and literature

Batur (2001) and Ercan (2008) stated that the connection between the Internet and literature is a relatively new phenomenon, especially in Turkey, and it has yet to be adequately examined or criticized. As a result, there are still not enough studies in Turkey on the subject. Kartal (2009), on the other hand, pointed out that a literary phenomenon specific to the Internet environment has yet to be realized. İğrek (2006) noted that this situation might be explained by the fact that authors and poets avoid or are uncomfortable with technology. İğrek added that recently many authors and poets, especially those from the new generation, have worked closely with the Internet, and this fact could indicate that views of the matter have changed. This change will hopefully promote studies and researches related to the matter rapidly. Nonetheless, another issue is to be discussed about whether the close interactions of poets and authors with the Internet will have negative consequences. Pektaş (2006) compiled a study that investigated the views of various authors and publishing house managers on the connection of the Internet and literature. Pektaş put forward the following opinions on the issue of literature and the Internet:

Wouldn't it harm the quality and prestige of the poem? as a quality poem book sells less than 1,000 copies while in the virtual environment ten thousands of poets show up is another question on the mind of the reader.... That literature takes place in the Internet pages brings together another anxiety. To what extent correct are the works published there? The manuscripts and poems that are copied many times on the Internet environment sometimes lose their originality. (p. 24)

On the contrary, 150 million copies of books have been printed since the invention of the printing press, and, according to the data recorded in 1997, more than 100 million documents have been published on the Internet. Paskin (1997) reported that this number is predicted to reach 800 million in the next decade, and that in the near future virtual texts might replace printed texts (cit. in Tonta, 2000). Likewise, Pack (1994) compared printed publishing with Internet publishing, and pointed out the advantages of electronic publishing in reaching readers, pressing process, distribution and lower costs. Furthermore, Internet publishing introduces possibilities for correction and updating, individual publishing and interaction (questionnaire, forum, commenting, chat rooms, e-mail and messaging). Nevertheless, readers frequently expose to spelling and composition errors because Internet texts are not controlled by an editor. In addition, the decreased quality of rapid correspondence and difficulties in archiving and hosting services should be mentioned among the main difficulties of electronic publishing (cit. in Nedelko, 2009). In another study, Söderberg (2001) compared the main features of literature on the Internet with that of printed literature. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 The comparison of the literature on the Internet and the printed literature

Digital document	Paper document
Flexibility	Stability
Interactivity	Authority
Speed	Reflection
Advantages of technology	Disadvantages of technology
Authenticity	Costs
Actuality	Time
Variety	Lack of structure
Interactivity	Lack of control
Reality of youngness	
Multicanality (images, sound, and texts)	

3. Internet tools and new learning environments

Internet tools allow individuals to obtain information through their cognitive, emotional and psychomotor experiences. These tools create environments and activities that allow learners to be actively involved in the learning process. In other words, these environments can be identified as student-centered learning environments because they provide individuals with opportunities to learn the ways of obtaining information, and constructing their knowledge by interpreting and evaluating the information they acquired (De Diana & Van Schaik, 1993; Schneider, 1994).

Web pages, wikis, blogs, podcasts, search engines, forums, news groups, e-mail, games, simulations, audio, music and video-sharing sites, web-based software, and other Internet-based tools and environments are now accepted as educational tools to be used in the teaching of foreign languages, literature and cultures (Arıkan, 2008). However, especially in recent years, it is observable that in both mobile communication and Internet tools used for communication, such as e-mail, MSN, forums, news groups and written messages have become shorter or even abbreviations reduced to few images (Hamzah, Ghorbani & Abdullah, 2009). Educators worry that people who get used to shortening their written communications or communicating through visual images would not be as interested as people used to read novels of hundreds of pages (Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier & Cheever, 2009). Arıkan (2008) investigated the reading habits of foreign languages teacher trainees and found results supporting this conjecture. Subjects stated that they avoided reading novels because of both the differences between today's language and the language of literary works, and the abundance of pages. This problem is reinforced and generalized every day with the multiple-choice questions that are used in every field of the educational system. In addition, although students live in a world with full of media images, it has shown that they do not possess the necessary skills to interpret those images correctly (Hobbs, 1997). Moreover, because the output and products of virtual teaching environments affect individuals' cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills in the way different from the traditional teaching environments, a new literacy concept for Internet-based teaching environments has become a necessity.

4. Literacy concept and computer literacy

Researchers have defined in multiple ways the concept of literacy, which is renewed and renamed continuously by the collective contributions of the individuals who form a society (McCarthy & Raphael, 1992). For instance, Kellner (2001) defined literacy as the sufficient and effective use of communicative images that are made meaningful by society. McGarry (1993), who defined literacy as a relative concept, pointed out that the concept of literacy did not mean the same thing for people who earned their living from farming in rural areas, and for those who lived in urban areas and functioned differently. Currently, parallel with technological developments, the concept of literacy includes not only the skill of decoding written manuscripts but also various skills such as digital (Wecker, Kohnle & Fischer, 2007), cultural, visual, ecologic, information and computing literacy (Murray, 2008). Among the mentioned skills, computing literacy is defined by Wecker, et al (2007) as the skill of using a computer. Shapiro and Hughes (1996) mentioned seven different dimensions related to this concept. These dimensions can be summarized as follows:

(1) Tool literacy: The ability to understand and use the practical and conceptual tools of current information technology (including software, hardware and multimedia) that are relevant to education and the areas of work

and professional life that the individual expects to inhabit.

(2) Resource literacy: The ability to understand the form, format, location and access methods of information resources, especially daily expanding networked information resources.

(3) Social-structural literacy: The understanding that information is socially situated and produced, and knowledge of the ways this process occurs.

(4) Research literacy: The ability to understand and use the IT-based tools relevant to the work of today's researchers and scholars.

(5) Publishing literacy: The ability to format and publish researches and ideas electronically in textual and multimedia forms (including via the World Wide Web, e-mail and distribution lists and CD-ROMs), and to introduce them into the electronic public realm and community of scholars.

(6) Emerging technology literacy: The ability to continuously adapt to, understand, evaluate and make use of emerging innovations in information technology.

(7) Critical literacy: The ability to critically evaluate the intellectual and social dimensions of the strengths and weaknesses, potentials and limits and benefits and costs of information technologies.

5. Hypothetical frame for a new learning environment

Eagleton and Guinee (2002) emphasized that the Internet plays a special role for students in conducting researches, and that they need to know how to behave in the multi-dimensional environment. They argued that it is imperative to deliver the necessary strategies for students with the help of training and education environments. It is observed that students take on more responsibility in Internet activities when they have the options to use the tools that catch their interest, and to transfer their researches into different types of visual and audio applications in the virtual environment. In this way, individuals find the opportunity to develop their creativity, which they used to determine their inclinations and aesthetic values. These values are then used to make new fictive adjustments.

It might be stated that, once the computing literacy dimensions mentioned above (Shapiro & Hughes, 1996) are adapted to literature courses, the content of literature courses will be formed as the following sub-dimensions and applications. According to these adjustments, students who study literature will be held to the following criteria:

(1) They should possess the basic knowledge that is necessary to use the Internet comfortably;

(2) They should have learned where they can obtain the textual, visual and audio files of literary works;

(3) They should be aware of the purpose, benefit and disadvantages of moving literary works onto the Internet;

(4) They should be equipped to carry out more extensive research to reach information related to literature;

(5) They should have sufficient knowledge and self-confidence to share their feelings and thoughts with others in an Internet environment related to literary works, periods or authors;

(6) They should use new technological opportunities in the teaching of literature with an open mind, for instance, students should be able to prepare their own podcast files, record audio files of complete or excerpted literary texts, and move these files onto the Internet;

(7) They should be cognizant of the benefits and limits of the Internet in improving the learning process. It is obvious that the Internet environment does not always provide excellent results in learning.

6. Recommendation for a new Internet-based learning environment

With these views taken into consideration, the following suggestions present recommendations for a sample literature course:

(1) The teacher should determine that at what level students use the Internet, and recommend new methods (such as work in pairs) to expand their knowledge.

(2) In the classroom environment, a literary work can be obtained online and read together with the students. If the teacher aims at improving listening skills, audio materials such as podcast files of poems can be obtained online and played for students. To reinforce this process, the teacher can use gap-filling exercises in which students write the words they hear, or exercises in which students determine the features of a poem such as voice, rhyme and meaning.

(3) Poems can be analyzed in paired or group activities. Teachers might encourage students to create blogs (Figure 1), use news groups (Figure 2), or discuss the studied poems over e-mail.

(4) Students might obtain information about a poem, its author, or the period of the work on the Internet. In this process, educators would ask students to note down conflicting information in different sources and evaluate the reliability of the information.

(5) Students might evaluate their work, which they have done individually, in pairs, or as a group, by sharing overall results in a blog, news group or e-mail.



Figure 1 Blog

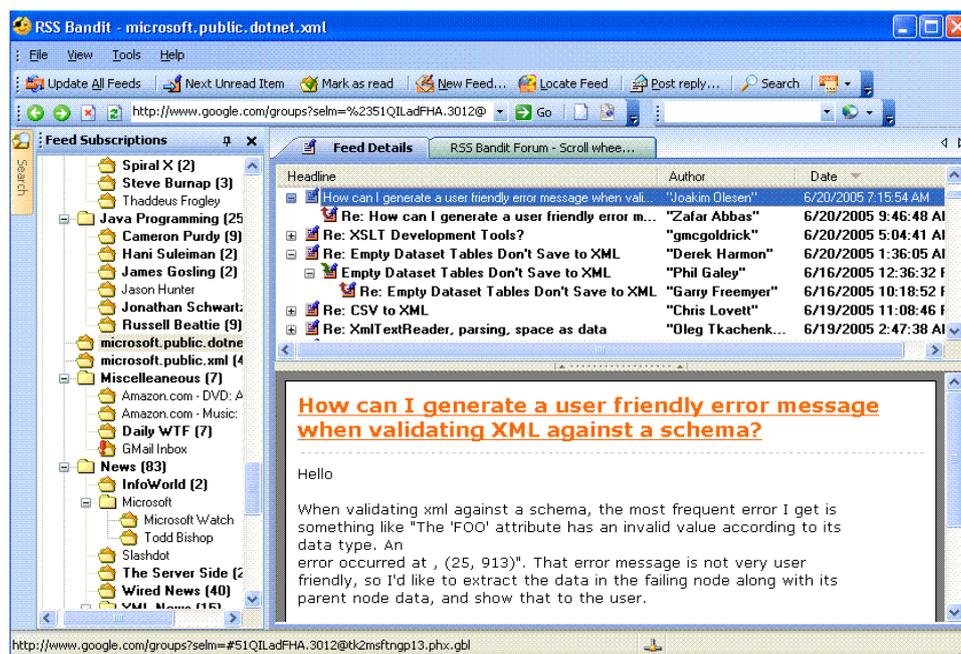


Figure 2 News group

7. Conclusion

In this study, the concept of literacy is re-evaluated in light of connections between the Internet and literature. It has been taken into consideration that currently, in addition to the skill of decoding written texts, literacy comprises many other skills. Primarily, the importance of computing literacy in Internet-based environments was underlined. Considering the concept of computing literacy, which is defined as the ability to use a computer, this study offered a new Internet-based learning environment for literature courses in bachelor's degree programs for training foreign languages teachers. The theoretical dimensions of learning, as well as contemporary training approaches, were thoroughly considered in outlining the above recommendations for incorporating computer literacy skills into these courses. Having considered the above course syllabus, it is clear that in teacher training programs, the use of Internet technologies as a course tool is absolutely necessary. For this reason, it is concluded that future research should focus on the investigation of Internet-based learning environments in every detailed aspect.

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