Towards narrative-centred digital texts for advanced second language learners

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a steady influx of language development software and games intended for use both at home and in the classroom. Although some of these technologies are effective for language learners to develop certain skills such as sight word recognition, many of them lack aspects of advanced level literacy such as expanded narrative and character development, which can allow for higher cognitive function and thus greater language mastery. While recent research emphasizes the pedagogical possibilities for video games and interactive fiction when teaching basic L1 literacy and literature respectively (Simanowski, Schäfer and Gendolla, 2010; Beavis, O'Mara and McNeice, 2012), this paper makes the argument that similar texts and media can help advanced L2 language learners further develop a knowledge of figurative, culturally imbued language which they could analyze and substantiate in relatively autonomous environments. Furthermore, these digital texts function as dynamic, pedagogical tools that can elicit critical technological literacy, a skill that is ever more crucial in our increasingly mediatised and technological age.

Key words: second language acquisition, digital literature, English second language teaching, computer assisted language learning

Résumé

Récemment, un afflux constant de logiciels et de jeux pour l'acquisition des langues à la maison et à l'école a été mis sur le marché. Même si quelques-unes de ces technologies aident de façon efficace les apprenants à parfaire certaines compétences, comme la reconnaissance des mots écrits, bon nombre d'entre elles ne tiennent pas compte des aspects de la littératie aux niveaux avancés, comme les descriptions détaillées et l'évolution des personnages, qui peuvent faire appel aux fonctions cognitives supérieures et, par conséquent, donner lieu à une plus grande maîtrise des langues. Bien que les recherches menées récemment mettent l'accent sur les possibilités pédagogiques offertes par les jeux vidéo et la fiction interactive pour l'enseignement des compétences de base (L1) en

littératie et littérature (Simanowski, Schäfer et Gendolla, 2010; Beavis, O'Mara et McNeice, 2012), l'auteur soutient, dans le présent document, que l'utilisation de textes et de médias semblables peut aider les apprenants avancés (L2) à accroître leurs connaissances du langage figuré et imprégné de la culture et à renforcer leur aptitude à analyser et à corroborer ce langage dans des contextes relativement autonomes. Qui plus est, ces textes numériques font fonction d'outils pédagogiques dynamiques qui peuvent favoriser la littératie technologique essentielle, une compétence qui devient encore plus cruciale dans notre monde de plus en plus axé sur les médias et les technologies.

Mots-clés : acquisition d'une langue seconde, littérature numérique, enseignement de l'anglais langue seconde, apprentissage des langues assisté par ordinateur

Introduction

As a college-level English second language (ESL) teacher in Quebec, I am often looking for ways to motivate my young adult and adult students in the classroom, particularly when I am competing for the students' attention with their electronic devices. Technology and new media has widened the cognitive divide between deep attention and hyper attention (Hayles, 2007[1]) which is more than ever present in the classroom, evident by the challenge in keeping students on task and motivated or even interested in the course material. Recent research (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009) on motivation in a second language acquisition (SLA) course reveals that success often depends upon the students' creation (or negotiation) of selves; the ways in which the desired possible selves attained in a classroom should feel congruent with important social identities. But what type of literature-based content can address students' formation of identity and yet also take advantage of their dependence on (or receptiveness to) electronic media?

One way the aspect of identification and identity creation can be effectively stimulated is by using narrative. Moreover, when presented through the medium of digital narratives, a teaching technique can emerge that could be an effective way to promote motivation. Though little research has been done on digital narratives in the L2 classroom, this paper will analyze some of the few

[1]Hayles hypothesizes that more recent generations of students are more inclined to be practitioners of hyper attention, characterized by "switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom" (p. 187) as opposed to deep attention which is characterized by "concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus" (p. 187).

texts that do exist and supplement with some selections of articles that look at digital literature in the L1 classroom. Adapted to English second language speakers, the digital games, as well as narrative-focused texts and techniques discussed here, can provide and bolster effective teaching strategies which, of equal and if not more importance, elicit technological literacy, a skill that is ever more crucial in our increasingly mediatised and technological age.

Narrative in ESL

At the 2014 annual RASCALS (Regroupement au service des cégeps, anglais langue seconde) conference for college-level ESL teachers in Quebec, ESL teacher Nicholas Walker delivered a highly effective workshop on the benefits of teaching narrative in the ESL classroom. Walker cogently argued in favour of giving narrative a more central place in college-level ESL curricula, presenting research that demonstrates how narratives share much of the grammar and vocabulary of informal registers (Biber et al., 1999; Labov, 2010) and how an emphasis on informal registers in second language instruction should reduce anxiety and increase integrative motivation in non-fluent learners (Segalowitz, 1976). Furthermore, Walker outlined recent objections to the current overemphasis on academic essay-writing, a writing model that undermines personal expression, originality, and critical thinking skills (Moss, 2002; Berggren, 2008; Duxbury, 2008; Rorschach, 2004).

In addition to Walker's argument, recent research (Brockmeier and Carbaught, 2001; Bamberg, 2010) demonstrates that narrative has the potential of creating meaningful links in people's lives through the ways in which it is primarily concerned with the significant question of "Who am I?" While reading narratives, many readers (whether subconsciously[2] or not) identify with characters in the stories they read. This can be extremely effective in a SLA classroom in that it creates meaningful associations and promote meaningful dialogue and reflection, techniques that have been the backbone of some SLA approaches (Krashen, 1981; Harmer, 2009; Nation, 2009).

Hypertext and interactive fiction

Narrative need not only be studied through books. There are currently many ways of reading and writing narrative. Digital, or electronic, literature[3] is a

[2]Subconsciously because often readers will claim that they "like" a character though they do not know why. The reason is often a case of identification with the character's behaviour and/or traits.

[3]I will be using the term "digital literature" as shorthand for electronic literature as well as digital games. For an interesting discussion regarding debates in the difference of terminology, see Hayles and Pressman (2013) and Simanowski et al. (2010).

burgeoning field of study in the humanities (Hayles and Pressman, 2013) that presents narrative in interesting new ways. Out of digital literature, there are two interesting genres that can be adapted in ESL classrooms which are hypertext fiction and interactive fiction. Hypertext fiction is a genre of electronic literature that requires a reader's interaction by clicking items on the screen. Whereas first-generation hypertext fiction's (pre-1995)[4] distinguishing feature was the predominance of a hypertext link to progress (or expand) narrative, second-generation use "a wide variety of navigation schemes and interface metaphors that tend to deemphasize the link as such" (Hayles, 2008, p. 7). This genre allows for a certain amount of freedom. Often a nonlinear narrative is developed and, consequently, a variety of interpretations are made possible through the user's interaction with the text. Though best served for advanced-level English learners given that they are more equipped to fully explicate narrative modalities, hypertext fiction can be used as an interesting pedagogical tool to interrogate narrative structure and also functions as situated learning, given that students must learn as a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In one of the few examples of using hypertext literature in the L2 classroom, Ensslin (2006) demonstrates how hypertext can be not only an effective object of study for L2 students, but also a great use of output. She reports on a study of intermediate-advanced level students being taught hypertext fiction, its theoretical underpinnings and characteristics. The students were then encouraged to create a hypertext fiction using Dreamweaver software. Ensslin recounts how the results of her research strongly suggest that a "productive hypertext environment, largely characterised by computer-based, collaborative, communicative language learning, does in fact have a positive effect on learning outcomes, confidence, motivation, and autonomy, particularly at intermediate and advanced levels" (p. 19). She demonstrates how students, in autonomous environments, can individually construct and analyze, through an instructor's help, their given narrative and how it develops. Given that the processes of hypertext fiction often relies on a choice, language learners are able to analyse and discuss cause and effect situations by their choices of narrative progression and allow them some limited creative freedom within a pre-constructed narrative, or, as in the case in Ensslin's study, construct their own narrative using the modalities of hypertext fiction.

Interactive fiction, though slightly different, is similar to hypertext fiction in its autonomous and situated learning aspects. In interactive fiction, a narrative begins and the reader is given a scenario so that they can input a series

[4]Hayles separates first-generation and second-generation hypertext literature with a break coming around 1995.

of instructions to propel the narrative a certain way. Interactive fiction differs from hypertext fiction in that it contains stronger gaming elements, so much so that the demarcation between interactive fiction and digital games is far from clear (Hayles, 2008, p. 8). Some scholars (Neville, Shelton and McInnis, 2009; Pereira, 2013) have begun looking into the way these gaming elements, with a particular focus on language, can be applied in L2 courses. Typically in interactive fiction, the reader or "interactor" (Hayles, 2008, p. 8) might involve typing basic directions such as "open door", "get letter", "speak". Depending on the digital text, interactive fiction can be useful for a range of English second language speakers from beginner to advanced levels in that they can think of strategies in a second language to propel a narrative forward. Reading and decoding techniques of inference can also occur in that "solving many of the IF puzzles requires the user to make a leap of inference from one device to another that resembles it in function; for example if a door and box are properly linked, opening the box also opens the door, which otherwise will not yield" (p. 9). Similar to hypertext fiction, interactive fiction sets in place a narrative freedom that allows readers and interactors to choose how a narrative moves forward. Notwithstanding this limited "freedom" of narrative control, there are some concerns that have been raised in that interactive fiction and hypertext fiction can display a "fractured narrative structure, a confusing navigation system, low level of reader absorption, and the question of narrative closure" (Simanowski et al., 2010, p. 233). Yet, despite these concerns, both hypertext fiction and interactive fiction can allow teachers to generate interesting questions and discussion among students about authorship of digital texts and narrative coherence. Such issues were raised in Daemmrich's courses (2007); after reading some hypertext fiction and poems, students were left claiming " 'Hypertext storytelling makes us aware that we are the storytellers'; or 'In a sense the reader becomes part of the poem' " (p. 426). Though her students are referring here to hypertext fiction, one can see how similar remarks could apply to interactive fiction, particularly when Daemmrich claims that the students recognized the ways in which "digital literature fundamentally interchanges the roles of the active writer and the passive reader" (p. 426). And despite some claims that the non-linear narrative can be difficult to absorb, Daemmrich underlines the importance of getting readers and students out of their habitual comfort zones that have been traditionally established while reading in a traditional, linear fashion.

Digital games

Expanding upon the interactor's narrative freedom in digital texts, digital games can offer much more interactivity as well as interesting pedagogical strategies for second language learners. Apperley and Walsh (2012) argue that "digi-

tal game paratexts can work as a useful segue — because they conform most closely to the textual requirements of the 'official curriculum' — to introduce digital games into literacy and English curricula" (p. 116). Apperley and Walsh believe that using digital games paratexts (i.e. the texts around and about digital games) functions as an effective entry point into discussing digital gaming as a tool to develop literacy while adhering to literacy requirements of the official curriculum. They further argue the pedagogical advantages of this point, when they claim that:

> When children and young people read, research and design paratexts they are engaged in relevant print-based and multimodal literacy practices, making these activities a fluid example of situated learning (Gee, 2003; Stevens et al., 2008). Acquiring gaming literacy does not just involve learning how to play digital games, but also the intertextual navigation, comparison and reading of the 'official' and 'unofficial' paratexts, and contextualising the information contained in light of the credibility of the particular sources. (p. 117)

For Apperley and Walsh, gaming literacy can require students to initiate complex and diverse reading strategies that can allow them to improve their reading skills. One can imagine analogous strategies employed in an advanced second language classroom. A teacher can have his or her students select from a series of narrative-based digital games, yet also require the students to have done some required reading around the game, i.e. paratextual reading. This pedagogical approach demonstrates that digital, narrative-based games are not pedagogical ends in and of themselves, but can instigate a series of cognitive practices through an analysis of varied texts in a second language.

Using surrounding texts when discussing digital games is also the approach of several of the authors in Beavis et al. (2012). For example, the approach by Beavis and Apperley (2012, p. 17) to digital games in the literacy classroom is inspired by a traditional approach to language education: learning language, learning through language and learning about language. Thus the authors break down each category in relation to digital games, first discussing "Knowledge about games", which looks at games as cultural artefacts. Teachers focus the students' attention on narrative and aesthetic aspects, narrative structures and features of specific games; their relation to other narratives in games and other literary modes or genres (p. 18). Next, they discuss "The world around the game", which includes a discussion of physical and virtual spaces, public and private locations, settings shared with others or alone (p. 19). Next is "Me as games player", where teachers promote a self-reflexivity about students as game players, discussing issues of value, ideology, identity, ways players are positioned as games (p. 19). And finally, "Learning through games", which the authors, citing video-game theorist Ian Bogost, call "procedural rhetoric — the ways in which players learn or take on a particu-

lar understanding or perspective by following the logic of game through game play" (p. 19). This logic, according to the authors, is similar to the way learning takes place through process drama, a teaching strategy in which both teachers and students are working in and out of roles. As in L1 teaching environments, process drama has also been found to be effective in L2 environments (Kao and O'Neill, 1998; Brauer, 2002) and though research is still forthcoming, it stands to reason that these "digitized" process drama strategies would be equally effective in an L2 classroom.

In an earlier article, Apperley and Beavis (2011) also specifically look at character creation and the ways in which game players can culturally imbue their characters. Apperley and Beavis recount how a student named Majida created a new character for the PC role-playing game *Sacred* (Ascaron, 2004), a game she was currently playing. Majida created a new female character that "used magic powers focused on the control over the element of earth and evoked magic through dance" (p. 137). The character Majida created had an appearance and aesthetic that was Middle Eastern. According to the authors, Majida's character was "a way of writing back to the game — a critical take on two noticeable absences" (p. 137) for, as Majida had noticed, there were no Arabic nor female characters, despite the fact that the appearance of the game was strongly Middle Eastern, with deserts, palm trees and so on. Her avatar was "both Arabic and sexy, evoking particular ways of being and femininity, connecting to her own sense of identity and self in the 'outside' world" (p. 137). Here Apperley and Beavis give an effective example of how a player can not only creatively develop a character but also suffuse it with a socio-cultural element. This technique can be extremely effective in an ESL classroom, given that students studying ESL are often working in-between languages and therefore in-between cultures. A pedagogical activity such as the one described above, can give ESL students an "in-between space" to express, and negotiate, the hybrid (and sometimes) bifurcate reality of adopting a second language and culture.

Identity

The act of creating (or interrogating) an identity in a second language, virtual world, not only allows students to work (and express themselves) in an in-between space; it can also allow students to navigate the web of that second language, especially in relation to something close to them: their identity. The connection between identity and language acquisition is significant, as Neville (2010) points out. He claims that "language acquisition can be seen as a form of identity construction, shaping not only the internal thought processes of an individual but also influencing how the person functions in sociocultural spheres" (p. 452). Neville's article and recent research (2014) are excellent ex-

amples of integrating digital narratives into second language acquisition classrooms. His work demonstrates how narrative is an effective tool in dramatizing characteristics of human interaction as they focus on unique patterns of events over time, the relation of these events to larger events, and the intentional states of the actors who move these events forward (2010, p. 451). Neville is also adept at demonstrating the difference between the logico-scientific mode, which concerns itself with truth statements, and general paradigms, contrasting it to the narrative mode that "revels in the slippage between personal and communal interpretations of events, between local knowledge and larger communities of practice" (p. 451). This slippage is slightly reduced in narrative and goal-oriented based digital games and thus makes them easier to be adapted into a classroom rather than computer mediated communication (CMC) environments (such as Second Life), given that the former can allow for a more restricted (or refereed) gameplay and environment. This is not to say that CMC environments are ineffective for SLA classrooms, however, given that they support virtual spaces in which "cultures and meaning emerge from a complex set of interactions among the participants, rather than as a part of a redefined story or narrative arc" (Thomas and Brown, 2009, p. 37). I believe that narrative-based digital games and texts might be beneficial in that students' interpretation would be slightly less open-ended and less difficult for teachers to manage or use in the classroom.

Despite the benefits of a restricted, coherent narrative, there are also certain pedagogical advantages in problematizing narrative, particularly in how it represents the real world. In his article, Neville (2010) favours digital narratives whose structures "closely resemble those in the real world so that meaningful play and therefore meaningful learning can occur" (p. 456). And though relating narratives to the real world is a productive pedagogical tool, it should also be nuanced with the understanding that the real world does not always necessarily follow (or share in the structure of) an intelligible, unified narrative. Simanowski et al. comment on this point when discussing digital literature and online texts:

> The mosaic structure of a web site with documents of divergent origin each with its own particular identity and time, the simultaneity of divergent documents, artifacts, and media teaches us, according to Strehovec, to live with the coexistence of conflicting concepts, discourses, and cultures (p. 231)

Their observation is poignant here in comparing the structure or medium of digital literature to the multiplicity of discourses and concepts one encounters in life. In more specific relation to digital game play, Boluk and Lemieux (2013) deconstruct narrative coherence and its relation to the real world. They argue that, by playing the game *Dwarf Fortress*, players must inevitably accept the illogical game mechanics which dramatize, to some more perceptive

game players, that similar concepts are also fundamentally present in the real world itself. Though this does not disparage the teaching of narrative via digital games, it rather highlights the problematic of coherent narratives in both digital gaming and the real world. This is an important skill which can develop a nuanced, critical thinking perspective that is as important for a first language learner as a second language learner.

Conclusion

The authors examined in this article demonstrate the ways in which technology, but more specifically, digital literature and digital games can be used in the classroom in innovative ways. From improving basic literacy (Beavis and Apperley, 2011; Apperley and Walsh, 2012) to interrogate deeper questions of narrative (Daemmrich, 2007; Neville, 2010) and interrogating its similarity to life (Simanowski et al., 2010; Boluk and Lemieux, 2013), the articles reviewed explicitly recount the ways in which narrative-based digital texts and games can bring new and inventive ways of reading, discussing and interpreting texts into the classroom. These days, more and more students are equipped with cell phones, tablets and portable computers and thus teachers need to be looking at new ways to provide narrative that can be enjoyed through digital media, especially given that these media promote autonomy in their ability to be viewed at virtually any place or any time. Digital narrative combines the positive learning dynamics of narrative in an ESL classroom discussed above with the possibility for autonomous praxis that students are frequently already familiar with through individualized digital technology. However, teachers must provide commentary and guidance aiding the students' progress through narrative and interrogating (or illuminating) narrative choices and meanings. If we agree with socio-cultural SLA theory (Lantolf, 2000) that language mediates reality and thus all of its socio-cultural offshoots should be considered in an SLA classroom, and we accept the idea that language is indeed a technology (Frank and Gibson, 2008), then we would be foolish not to consider how contemporary technology adds another lens to that mediation and how an awareness of the functionality of that lens can give us an advantage as SLA pedagogues (through its ludic possibilities), but more importantly the ways in which it can provide (and nurture) critical thinking of how that mediation of reality is formed and affects our students' lives on a daily basis.

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