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Hypertext Flexibility in a Web Learning Environment to Promote Extensive Reading Activities in School Learning

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Abstract: This paper describes a study in progress aimed at secondary school students of English as a Second Language, concerning poetry as a possibility for extensive reading activities, supported by an hypertext approach to the design of the learning environment.

Introduction

Poetry has been a challenge for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and students. The former evaded the issue by simply not using poetry in their classes and the latter were quite content in not having to deal with texts that they considered "difficult" (Lazar, 1993; Ur, 1996).

The aim of this in progress study is to understand the importance of the hypertext flexibility in the design of web based learning environment to the literary text and mainly the use of poetry in the second language learning process in every level of teaching as a possibility to be taken into account in the domain of extensive reading activities.

The design of flexible, collaborative and open learning environments directed to building up knowledge in straight relation to the subject's own pace and the user's needs has its roots in the educational approaches of social constructivism and situated learning.

The change in the design of new learning environments is shown through the flexibility of the learning processes, the multidimensional exploration of the learning materials, a personal and collaborative commitment in the learning goals and the working out of a individual and collaborative strategy for knowledge construction and experience (Spiro et al., 1995; Jacobson et al., 1996; Romiszowski, 1997; Collis et al., 1997; Dias, 1999, Rogers, 2000).

The Study

The research design is a qualitative based analysis of the student learning interaction and understanding of poetry text through the hypertext and hypermedia support of flexibility and contextual learning. This goal is provided by an hypertext based learning environment, that offers to the student the possibility to explore the dimensions of meaning construction, through associated links to words and images. This associated web of links perform a dynamic view of multiple texts, and suggest a deeper understanding of the internal relationships of the poetic text.

The hypertext based learning design allow students to produce a reconstruction of the poetic text, through the changing and introduction of new words or images to the original poem, composing a personal view that incorporate the choices performed by the student, during the extensive reading activity.

To implement it the research design includes a web based learning workshop in reading poetry and a discussion forum to promote the sharing of personal understandings among students.

The flexibility of hypertext in constructing the representation network is closely related to the construction of meaning in learning. The construction of meaning is a dynamic process, as well as the

arrangement of hypertext nodes; meaning develops through the relationships between nodes (Borsook,1997:724).

This approach doesn't regard the learning process as an acquisition of knowledge externally organized and separated from his contextual framework. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of contextual building up of knowledge representations in learning, which is supported by the creation of a web of links among the informational materials of the hypertext representation. The educational hypertext is based on non-linear information organization that allows the user to choose his own individual or collaborative paths on a network, configuring it to his learning needs, previous knowledge and learning goals. The hypermedia approach was particularly innovative in terms of training since the hypertext doesn't only *display* the information but it *works out* as a dynamic web of representation.

In order to test this possibility, one class of twenty students, aged between fifteen and eighteen, in a large urban secondary school in Porto, Portugal, was selected to have classes on poetry as a part of their extensive reading activity. As in the Portuguese syllabus poetry is not included in the list of options the students have to fulfill this activity, they were given the possibility of working with several poems during the school year, in order to read a poem by e.e.cummings and from it to produce several different readings of the same poem using web based learning environments.

Conclusions

Results from the survey study shown a deeper involvement of students in suggested reading activities, namely: i) the high level of interaction dedicated to the exploration of the poem; ii) the construction of a personal understanding of the suggested poem using the associated links of words and images to produce the individual view; iii) a strong feeling of participation in the activities of reading and developing a personal and collaborative understanding of the poem; and iv) a positive attitude to the challenges of the exploration of the multidimensionality of the meaning in an hypertext based environment.

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