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English Language Classes – Preparing for the Future?

Conference

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Aims

To sensitize academic people for the need of media integration in the classroom, as media literacy is a prerequisite for successful participation in our today's and future society.

Abstract

Though everybody is talking about media literacy it still seems to be an abstract concept, far away from teaching English. In this session we have focused on making this concept more concrete, putting it into relation with a) the expectations of employers, b) the current situation at school, c) teacher training and - last but not least - with the English language classroom. Practical examples and a discussion rounded this session up.

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For academic purposes, material related with this conference talk could be obtained from [here](#).

English Language Classes – Preparing for the Future?

While we still don't know whether we are at the beginning of the Information Age, in its middle or already at its end, we can fully rely on the importance of media literacy in our daily life. Media and technology do not only play a central role in our society, the ability to efficiently handle them is to be regarded as one of the key competences employers expect from potential candidates.

Information Society

New concepts and terms of our age, e.g. *Information Society* are often allusive and disguise the implications with our complex society, sometimes labelled *Knowledge Society* as well: A clear differentiation between *data*, *information*, *knowledge*, and *wisdom* is indispensable for understanding these labels.¹

Boisot and Canals, when depicting their approach to the concept of *data*, *information* and *knowledge*, summarize accurately that *information is an extraction from data that, by modifying the relevant probability distributions, has a capacity to perform useful work on an agent's knowledge base* (Boisot & Canals, 2004. 47).

Hence knowledge is – in accordance with the constructivist/constructionist theory – actively created by the individual, the *agent-in-the-world*. When/after receiving data through perceptual filters, the *agent* uses conceptual filters to identify and extract the information from this data, and the generates knowledge on the base of associations with already *stored mental models* and *values*:

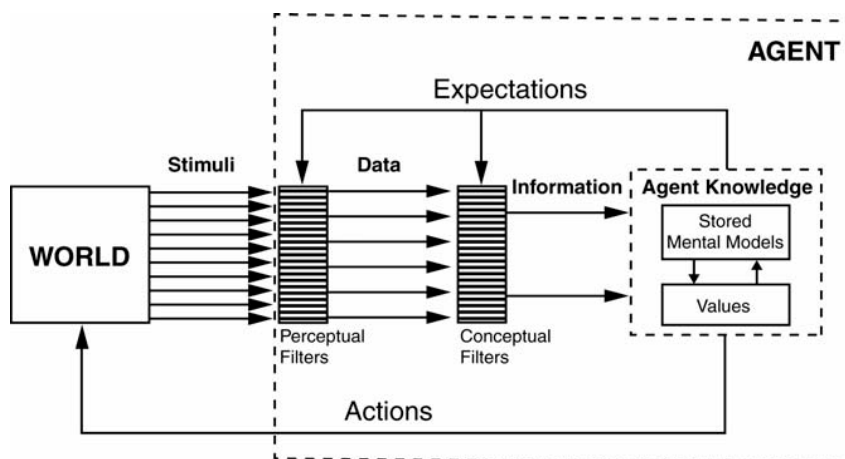


Figure 1: Boisot & Canals, 2004. 48: The agent-in-the-world.

As *There are physical limits to our access to data and hence to our ability to reliably extract information from data* (ibid. 57), we can not only conclude that due to differing individual abilities the extracted information differs, but that as a consequence of the physical limitations of our perception the knowledge generation process itself is limited.

Since the flux of *stimuli* or data doesn't cease during this process, it is evident that it is much more challenging when having a high quantity of stimuli, as given in our *Information Society*.

This can be illustrated well by the example of email and *spam*: Spam mails severely disturb the processing of incoming emails in the same way that a high stimulus input disturbs information processing itself. Consequently, the ability of information processing and knowledge generation – including the ability to escape the impact of mass media – is still to be regarded as *the* key competence of the 21st century. In the *Information Age*, individual deficiency in this competence has a strong impact on society, leading to what is known as the *Digital Divide*: The *digital winners*, disposing of the required abilities and having access to today's and tomorrow's technology, control the *digital losers*, lacking it.

Accepting that, in accordance with the well known saying, *knowledge is power* and knowing that information is not knowledge, we can deduce that information is an enabler for power, and thus *the* strategic resource all kind of organizations are striving for. Or, as Ronald Reagan coins in 1989: *Information is the oxygen of the modern age. It seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire, it wafts across the electrified borders. The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip.*² Whether his allusion to David and Goliath might be considered adequate is more than doubtful: New technologies – RFID-Chips, video surveillance (CCTV), Echelon and others – are powerful devices for monitoring and controlling society of which all kind of organizations take advantage day by day. In fact, the question that emerges is: Who's David, and who's Goliath?

Media Literacy

Media literacy, often reduced to the *ability to technically handle* the new technologies, comprises far more than what is commonly being acknowledged: It is *more than the ability to click with a mouse; it is a difficult extension of our [general] life competence.* (Hentig, H. v. 1999. 152). Technical (handling of technological devices), social (use of these devices for social participation), and cultural (media's role in society / in cultural contexts) competences in relation to media literacy are usually considered those to be learnt, while the reflective usage of media – including the knowledge about its role in a specific cultural context – are often disregarded. Economic or ecological media literacy are not even discussed in public.

What employers might expect

The vigour of new technologies has led to a shift in employers' expectations as well; media literacy has become a social and economic necessity: From the perspective of a small/medium sized international trading company, the top-5 skills expected from a potential assistant or manager would be:

- 1) Motivation
(Why this job? Why this company? Long-term plans and motivation.)
- 2) Communication skills
(manners, text production, presentations, negotiations, intercultural knowledge...)
- 3) Representation skills
(voice, personality, physical appearance, Is/Has this person a personality?)

- 4) Intellectual skills
(solid & task related understanding and knowledge, world knowledge, quick comprehension, ability for abstraction, “healthy” pragmatism)
- 5) Media literacy
(10finger typing, email, text, database, spreadsheet, security, privacy)

English is no longer an asset, but a matter of course. The same with intellectual skills. Motivation, communication and representation skills are decisive factors; and media literacy is the asset international companies are keen on: With a carefully estimated email traffic of around 100 emails per day, including the need for retrieving information in databases or calculating prices *on-the-fly*, 10finger typing is indispensable. Considering the financial damage a price calculation sent to a competitor could cause, a basic knowledge regarding security and privacy is desirable as well,

The speed of communication furthermore leads to a stronger focus on the communicative function of language: When earlier it might have been important not to forget the 3rd person singular –s (*he, she, it – das -s muss mit*) or to avoid typing errors, nowadays adequateness and correctness of the message – not of the language – are required.

The current situation at school...

At school, media literacy and the daily use of new technologies in learning environments are often regarded as a *nice to have*, being integrated only marginally when *there is time for it*. My research on the situation of new technologies and media literacy at a comprehensive school in Cologne with around 2.000 students and approximately 210 teachers, realized in March 2006, might reflect what is going on in schools today: While the technological prerequisites – four well equipped computer rooms, around 20 additional PCs in the library and four beamers for teachers – are given, teachers’ and students’ utilization of these devices is quite disappointing.

The research with n=115 students of year 11 and n=102 teachers witnesses that new media do form part of the respondents’ daily life: 93% of the teachers and 95.57% of the students have been working with computers for more than three years. 85% of the teachers and 70% of the students have email communication at least several times per week. 98% of the teachers and 90% of the students can handle emails well on their own. Around 95% of both dispose of a PC and internet access at home. At home, more than 60% use the PC every day, around 30% several times per week. Though they spend most of the day at school, only 20% of the teachers and 8.5% of the students use the school PCs every day, respectively 30% and 3.7% several times per week.

Active media use in the classroom seldom takes place: 23.47% of the teachers have never used a computer in class. Around 40% have never been to one of the computer rooms with their students, 65% have never done a PC-based presentation or used a digital projector. 90.63% of the teachers and 51% of the students have never worked with a webquest.

From the students' side the wish for more technology in the classroom is quite notable: 89% express clearly that they want teachers to *use PCs more often in the classroom*. While 99% of the teachers were of the opinion that the students will have disadvantages in their life without computer knowledge, only 77% of the students shared this opinion. In other words: Almost a quarter of around 17-year-old students living in 2006's information society isn't fully convinced that media literacy is a necessary skill for future success.

Reasons for the non-functioning of media integration in class are numerous, and can be identified easily: *No time for this 'nice-to-have', pupils don't want..., We have to get through with our subjects, I don't know how to handle...*

One of the questions that arises when bearing in mind the *House of Learning* and *student-centred education* is whether our society can afford to leave students out: In order not to become one of the digital losers they have to be literate in media and, as shown above, they urge to be it as well. A teacher's withdrawal to the position *I am an English teacher, and thus my job is to teach the language* is a reduction that can't be acceptable by no means: To fulfil their educative task and function teachers have to educate far beyond the subject itself. Which *Next Generation Europe* are we building, when apparently we are not even able or willing to cope with the current one? A re-thinking of a teacher's role in the information age is indispensable. As in spite of the given technological foundations media integration in class does not function, it must be the teacher's task to overcome obstacles generated through the different attitudes towards media and its application as an every day's tool: Students have to be educated according to the needs they will be facing in their future life; even if their beliefs and motivations need educational adjustment. Their right is our obligation.

What school should/could offer...

Confronted with the needs of our information society, projects like *Se/GO* (www.selgo.de) or *Lehrer Online Netz* (www.lo-net.de) have been initiated by the German government. Their relatively little success can be led back to several circumstances: Solutions had to be available soon and have thus been mainly designed in the form of top-down processes neglecting – at least partially – the clients' needs. Usability had to give way to the interests of involved parties such as Microsoft, school book publishers and others. Consequently long training times are needed for working with these platforms, and the fact that teachers in Germany are no longer allowed to participate in trainings during school time doesn't really motivate them. Given that changes can only be successfully implemented with the acceptance of the base, a successful implementation of media concepts for the educational sector can only be achieved through a bottom-up design.

In spite of the many obstacles which sometimes might just serve as an excuse for avoiding media-supported learning and teaching, media integration in ELT courses can be effectively realized with little effort, simply by recognizing and making use of the possibilities given to all

of us: We could work with the many webquests offered in the internet, use the web for online information retrieval, make students elaborate electronic portfolios or reading logs which they partially prepare alone and then join in one document for shared use. We could look for alternative learning platforms such as www.moodle.org, or use the obligatory *Facharbeit* for motivating students. We could and should use digital projectors instead of the blackboard or OHP and thus inspire our students to use them as well, e.g. for presenting pictures of their last holidays or favourite musicians. RSS-feeds and magazine newsletters offer a cost-free access to latest articles; students could be obliged to choose and present an article in class. Last but not least online TV and Radio, known as *podcasts*, enable us to meet the iPod-generation where it is, where it currently stands.

Thoughtful media integration does neither hinder nor impede language learning – it helps to experience it, thus making an information-based language acquisition process a real learning process leading to knowledge generation. At the same time experiencing the language fosters an active use of the technological devices so indispensable for active participation in our society.

Such methodological training can be embedded into rich context environments easily, following the principles of context-orientated language learning:

Why don't we take real job advertisements from the internet instead of copying old ones of even older school books, when the half-life period of information is only a fraction of what it was few years ago? Why don't our students write a *letter to the editor* to a real editor in order to get real feedback instead of writing it for a teacher who just gives it back full of red correction marks (*he, she, it...*)? We could then find answers to the question whether the created text has fulfilled its communicative function or not by analysing the obtained reply.

We could realize course evaluations online: The time needed for an initial training is nothing compared with the time we save when interpreting the data later. Grafstat, offered at www.grafstat.de, is free of charge for academic purposes.

Instead of hard copying lots of additional exercises for just a couple of really interested students, we could offer such material online, through the existing platforms or on our own website. We could help them to find useful web resources for learning: www.englischstunde.de.vu, for example, had been presented at the ELT conference in 2006 and corresponds with Cornelsen's *English G*. Not only that we avoid paper partially copied for the paper basket, we even allow students who missed class to access all relevant information 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, from wherever they might be. Of course we have to ensure that all students have equal access to the information and material. Any exclusion has to be avoided: Those who do not dispose of internet access at home could be given photocopies, parts of the lessons could take place in the computer room, they could

form groups for media based homework working at the home of a student with PC access, or in worst case, in Internet Cafés.

Asking students for their email addresses, they often argue that they don't have any at all. The fear of additional workload is bigger than the potential advantages they might not even be aware of. As a consequence they desperately try to escape this situation with all kind of excuses. Knowing that at least at my school around 95% of the students do have a computer and internet access at home, I offer my Secondary-II students to correct the last homework or group work given before an exam only if they send it via email. Students' counterargument is mostly the same: *It is your job to correct our homework! And typing the text is extra work for us!* My counterargument is mostly the same, too: *Well, my job is to teach you the best way I can adhering to the most efficient methodology, and to work a certain amount of hours for a certain payment. I am already working much more than for what I am paid for. Correcting this homework means extra-work for me as well. I'll do this gladly for you, but not "because it's my job". And – talking of jobs – it's your job to be a self-responsible and autonomous learner, and therefore you should contribute as well to this learning process.* As a result I avoid having to spend hours correcting illegible texts scribbled within two minutes on the floor, which most probably will not even be reviewed by the students at all: Only those who are really interested in the correction will make the effort to email me their work, and these benefit from the time I've saved.

In order to move students towards a reflection about their life in a digital society *classic* works like *1984* or *Brave New World* offer outstanding possibilities, especially when combined with McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* (lots of visual input) or Neil Postman's *Amusing ourselves to death*. The *Du bist Deutschland* campaign of the German government serves to put the supposed *science fiction* into relationship with the students' actual surroundings, their *Lebenswelt*. The film *Minority Report* allows to show two short scenes (2 minutes each) in order to start a rich discussion maybe at the beginning of a sequence. Viewing the entire film at the end leads to interested and motivated students. For *Fahrenheit 451* – obligatory in North-Rhine-Westphalia because of the *Zentralabitur* – a webquest could be a good choice: The different groups work on several aspects related with this novel (book burning, burning of people, Nazi-Germany, totalitarianism, censorship...) and elaborate a detailed reading log of parts of it. The results will then be presented in class and joined in one document which as a *Fahrenheit-Portfolio* does not only evoke the feeling of successful teamwork, but even makes this emotion a concrete experience as the students have a *real* product at hand. Used in such a way, technology does not isolate, but helps to train social skills as well.

Conclusion

Whether foreign language teaching in its currently practised form meets the present and future needs of our students has to be doubted. Media education should have a solid place in

ELT classes. Its training does not merely depend on the technological ground given: Attitude and motivation of teachers and students are the key to successful integration of new media in class. Dealing with media teachers should – the same way they are in many other respects – be a *Vorbild*, a model, for the students. How should students be willing to use technology as a tool, if teachers are neglecting to do so? As long as the *software* in our brains is not prepared for exploiting the devices available, more financial investments do not really make sense. Teachers do have a responsibility to enable students to actively participate in society and to prepare them for the future, as Kofi Annan gives us to understand: *Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.* The *Next Generation Europe* will not be built at policy makers' desks, it has to be built by us teachers, day by day in our classrooms. And there's neither reason nor time to wait any longer.

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¹ For the concept of information refer to Capurro, 1996, and Boisot & Canals, 2004. Capurro, 2001, depicts the different approaches to the concept of knowledge.

² <http://www.informationweek.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=10300367>. Ret. 22.09.2004. Due to its symbolic and linguistic richness I use this quotation for several purposes in the classroom: Due to the propagated values (freedom instead of *totalitarianism*, religion, borders / frontiers) it could serve to start a sequence on *Science & Technology* or on the *American Dream*. Literary devices might be extended to the analysis of the verbal constructions: The alliteration *information is* represents the only really strong and directly applied verb in this quotation. All other verbs are modified through passive voice (*topped by, will be brought down...*) or compounds (*to seep through, to waft across...*). An analysis of the quotation's content reveals that in fact it is a political speech in a nutshell: It could thus serve as a strong input for a rich discussion or creative writing by making the students write a political speech based on it.

³ For academic purposes, material related with this conference talk can be obtained from <http://www.maglic.de/docs.research/2007.BritishCouncil/2007.BC.html>.