

Web-text: Perceptions of digital reading skills in the ESL classroom

WENDY SUTHERLAND-SMITH – Monash University

ABSTRACT

Many educationalists have proposed a reworking of literacy concepts over the last few years, necessitated by the immense impact of technology on classroom practice, and most recently, with the advent of Internet information. New strategies required in Web reading and digital writing cause previous notions of literacy to be reshaped and compel teachers to rethink classroom reading practice. The aim of this paper is to compare student perceptions of reading skills needed in the traditional print-text mode with the skills needed to read and gather information on the Web. Do students perceive reading as different on the Web? Are there implications for reading classroom teachers?

This research was conducted in a medium-sized suburban government primary school of 580 students from 72 different countries. The participants were 48 students in two grade-six classes, with a focus on 12 English-as-second language (ESL) students' responses. These students came from Taiwan, China, India, Malaysia, Poland and Bhutan. The study was replicated in an adult ELICOS language centre environment with my own class of 18 students from China, Indonesia, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Japan. Different student expectations of Web-text compared to paper-text were evident. This research adds to our constantly evolving notions of literacy embracing technology and can be applied to primary, secondary and tertiary levels of ESL teaching practice.

Introduction

To succeed in any environment, students require the ability to locate, read and understand text. Traditional reading, on paper, requires certain skills to be taught which are appropriate in the paper medium. Paper-text is noninteractive, linear-sequential and static. The text is situated in the same place each time the book, magazine or article is opened. It is not updated or moved within the boundaries of the original cover, nor does it provide immediate access to many other 'live' references which can be as substantial in content as the original source. In the wired world of the Web, the original text may be updated regularly, or in some sites, continuously – for example BBC, CNN and other news services. It is not necessary to purchase new sources of text (morning and evening newspapers) in order to keep abreast of events in the digital-text environment. In addition, graphic images continuously change on the Web and require renewed analysis

each time, as was evidenced in sites emerging after the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001.

In the nonlinear, nonsequential Web-text environment, readers can be a part of the world of the author as 'electronic texts are flexible, transient and malleable rather than fixed, permanent and unchanging (like print on paper)' (Corbel 1999: 103). In some hyper-media environments text can be altered, partially read, and approached in an order and time that the reader controls. The reader may decide to use text as a stepping stone and jump, via links, to completely different sets of text. Thus, on the Web, the reader can become an active 'co-author' of text (Slatin 1991: 159). It is not necessary to follow the pre-designated path of writing the author created via headings and sub headings to make sense of the text, as it is in many paper-text modes. This is because it is the reader who determines the order of information flow, not the writer.

If teachers are to assist students effectively to achieve digital literacy, an examination of how students perceive the role of different text-types is required. A brief description of evolving notions of Web literacy indicates how concepts of literacy change and literacy itself becomes 'a shifting target' (Shetzer and Warschauer 1999: 2) in meeting the needs of society at any given period of time. It is important for teachers to remember that our approach to teaching English will inevitably alter as technology, policy, and society's needs and concepts of desirable literacy attributes manifest themselves.

Evolving notions of literacy and technology

As an experienced ESL teacher, my teaching has reflected a strong interest in the changing notions of literacy, and this study is informed by the discussion in the literature on the phenomenon of paper to digital text literacy. We have moved a long way from initial concepts of literacy as merely reading and writing, but the core question remains: Is there a new literacy for the new medium of the Web? Many teachers and academics consider that there is. The term 'Web literacy' is used to describe the finding, scanning, digesting, critically evaluating, and storing of pertinent information on the Internet. It is 'an ability to recognise and assess a wide range of rhetorical situations and an attentiveness to the information conveyed in the source's non-textual features' (Sorapure, Inglesby and Yatchisin 1998: 410).

Corbel (1999) contends that electronic text-types have significant characteristics that separate them from paper-based texts as they are 'digital' (p 100), and he develops the notion of computer literacies. For example, he contrasts 'hypertext reading (which) calls for associative thinking' (p 111) to forms used for paper-text, which he terms 'high print literacy' where the goal is a 'deep critical reading of a text' (p 110). Snyder (2002: 2) considers that 'silicon

literacies' extend literacy understandings within a broader social order and 'for the first time in history the written, oral and audiovisual modalities of communication are integrated into multimodal hypertext systems made accessible via the Internet'. She states that the literate being must understand how these 'iconic systems' (p 2) operate as well as the 'wider range of semiotic systems that cut across reading, writing, viewing and speaking' (p 3). Teachers need to evaluate the models of literacy they currently use in the classroom in order to incorporate these elements. Kellner examines multimedia growth in education and calls for an expansion of 'multiple literacies for our multicultural society' (2002: 292). He argues that visual literacy is an increasingly important skill to learn, and observes that although textbooks are 'more visual, graphic and multimodal' than before, it is 'CD-ROMs, websites and new multimedia that are the most distinctively multimodal and multisemiotic forms. These sites are the new frontier of learning and literacy' (2002: 310).

'Cyberliteracy', as defined by Gurak (2001: 14) is 'neither print literacy nor is it purely an oral literacy. It is an electronic literacy – newly emerging in a new medium – that combines features of both print and the spoken word, and it does so in ways that change how we read, speak, think and interact with others' (p 14). Gurak considers that many earlier concepts of literacy and reading skills were mainly 'performative' (p 13) meaning the ability to do something. For example, learning to use a computer mouse and keyboard may give you 'computer literacy' skills. She argues this concept is largely taking the aspect of a skills base (the ability to click, scroll and manipulate data), but does not necessarily take account of the 'orality' of Internet communication, critical analysis of multimedia, or the blurring of 'normally accepted distinctions (such as writing versus speaking)' (2001: 15–16) which concern us as teachers. This snapshot of current academic discussion indicates there is an inclusion of systems of logic, and oral and aural sense components as well as changes in the visual demands in reading itself.

Technoliteracy¹: the criticism

Whilst many academics embrace a technology and literacy union, there are those who oppose the use of technology in the classroom and advocate a critical approach to the issue of technology. Postman (1995) and Birkerts (1994) believe the advent of computer technology will lead to the impoverishment of the English language. They contend that poor concentration skills in dealing with lengthy and deep textual reading, poorer writing skills and a superficial understanding of issues due to the lack of depth in reading will result from the introduction of technology into the English teaching

classroom. It is crucial to critically evaluate the manner in which technology is used in the classroom to benefit students (Lankshear, Snyder with Green 2000), but it is implausible to ignore the impact that the Internet is having on society and education. In fact, 'the Web has already entered our classrooms even as we debate its value and its effects' (Sorapure et al 1998: 412), and we, as teachers, must weave an increasing web of technology into our classroom practice. The reality, in Victoria, is that technology is already part of the classroom, and government policies indicate it will increase. The Curriculum and Standards Framework (CSF) II policy for English warns teachers that:

The increasing use of technological tools has implications for literacy acquisition and development. New and emerging uses of literacy need to be considered in the English classroom (Board of Studies 2000: 6).

Therefore, while a critical perspective must be maintained as to the purposes and appropriateness of the use of technology in the classroom, as teachers we are required to assist our students to achieve the set outcomes in the governing policy documentation.

Web-text literacy

Web literacy demands an incorporation of the key reading, or navigation, skills: access to information; analysis of information (including multi-media), and processing procedures to store or move text. While these skills appear to be the same as paper-text, academic writers seem to agree that Web literacy involves an expansion of traditional critical reading skills to incorporate evaluation of visual and non-textual features and a greater use of associative logic (Bolter 1991; Kress 1997; Reinking 1998; Shetzer and Warschauer 1999; Snyder 1999; Gurak 2001; Snyder 2002).

In Web-based reading, students rarely appear to follow a linear-sequential reading model. As Slatin (1991: 158) says, 'Reading, in hypertext, is understood as a discontinuous or nonlinear process, which, like thinking, is associative in nature, as opposed to the sequential process envisioned by conventional text'. Students jump from one place to another and are cued by colour, in the form of previously determined links to other sites of information and they frequently backtrack in their search. Hypertext presents nonlinear-thinking models for students and the Web 'offers the opportunity to extend literacy skills – such as associative logic, visual rhetoric and interactivity' (Sorapure et al 1998: 410). The speed and degree of change that online Web literacy brings to the teaching of reading presents a challenge for teachers. The Web is a 'vast, open, and uncatalogued library, and one in which reference librarians are nowhere to be

found' (Sorapure et al 1998: 410). It can be a difficult medium to manage as it constantly changes at a rapid pace, but technological skills are essential for survival in the twenty-first century, and our students must be competent and comfortable with the medium. Part of our professional development and personal methodology is to become critically attuned to the world of the Web as it is integrated into our classrooms by government policy, pedagogical frameworks, and industry lobbying. Teachers need to become 'technology critics as well as technology users' (Selfe and Selfe 1994: 484)

Research methodology

A qualitative ethnographic research design was chosen for this study, following Denzin and Lincoln's work (1994) establishing the validity of naturalistic qualitative approaches to research. In particular, it was desirable to select an approach which could focus on the culture of an ESL classroom. My framework is based on Pierce's (1995) model as I approached the study from a critical perspective. I followed her six 'tenets' (Pierce's term) as they encapsulated my idea that critical researchers believe that the goal of educational research is social and educational change. One of the motivating factors behind this study was to examine the impact and rapid change which was taking place in my own ESL classroom associated with the increased use of computers and the Internet. This was due, in part, to the enormous impact computers had on courses offered and curriculum options in the language centre and schools in which I was employed.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was designed to enable observation of students in traditional paper-based and networked classrooms. The traditional paper-based classroom contained places for 30 students at tables and writing information was shared via a whiteboard at the front of the room. A television and video recorder were also part of the traditional classroom. The networked classroom was a computer laboratory with 35 IBM Pentium computers including a teacher's workstation that were linked through a central server. There were sufficient computers for students to work in pairs or on one computer, if so desired. I was the classroom teacher in both the paper-text and digital-text classrooms. I also observed and spoke informally to students in their library or independent research classes, in which I was not the teacher in charge. The project set took 20 hours of class time over a ten-week teaching period.

Observations were conducted for one hour every day in the first week and then one hour a week over the ten-week term in the paper-based (traditional) classroom (a total of 14 hours observation). These observations followed a combination of Carspecken's (1996) approach of keeping 'thick' observation

notes, to determine the classroom dynamics and brief observation notes describing imbalances in participation, the latter necessitated by time constraints. Observations were also undertaken for part of every computer laboratory session, totalling two hours per week. It is difficult to quantify total computer laboratory observation time, because in some sessions students had more workstation problems requiring my assistance than in others. For example, students had problems with server logins which took considerable class time to fix, but all students in the class were observed over the ten week term. In addition, students were informally interviewed as they worked on computers during this time and field notes taken at my own workstation immediately following the discussion. Four hours of computer laboratory sessions were audio-taped and transcribed.

Importantly, the classrooms had to function in their usual way, and it was not possible to transcribe all the data, observe and teach full-time, so I decided to select relevant text from audio-taped interviews for transcription and coding. These form 'communicative events' as described by Nunan (1993: 3-5), and also draw on Fairclough's notion of discourse events which are 'bounded instances of social interaction around or with a written or spoken text' (1989: 15). Questionnaires (see appendix) were distributed in the two grade six classrooms and the adult ELICOS classroom and answered in class, so there was a 100 per cent return rate, although some students did not answer all questions. Questionnaire and interview transcriptions were coded using NVivo, a Qualitative Solutions Research (QSR) software package (for a description of the software's functions see <http://www.qsr.com.au>). Coding followed the four broad categories established by Corbel (1999). For example, one category was set as 'Navigation' and this node then cross-checked data entries from questionnaire responses, interview transcripts and field note entries for any comment relating to Internet navigation. The software proved an effective tool in collating and coding data from multiple sources.

THE STUDENTS' PROJECT

The students in both the primary and ELICOS settings were given a project which required them to research a famous Australian over 20 hours of class time. The task was to place that person within the international framework of events, and to find a famous invention and a world event that happened in their chosen era. Text was read in both the Web environment, in computer classes scheduled during the day, and paper mode (library or research sessions). Students were required to give an oral presentation at the conclusion of the project, supported visually by either Powerpoint or poster presentations. Presentations were teacher- and peer-assessed with written feedback.

Results

Overall, the results from the questionnaires revealed that more students used the Internet (25) than books (23) but many students used both resources. Twenty-seven students indicated they preferred to use the Internet and 19 students preferred books. The disparity in totals is because some students did not answer all questions on the questionnaire and some students used books and the Internet equally. Interestingly, 52 per cent of students perceived Web reading as different from print-text reading and saw them as fulfilling different roles in their reading research projects. Thirty-one of 48 students commented that Web reading was different from paper reading, nine said there was no difference, two said they didn't know, and six did not answer this question. Interviews with the three class teachers and the computer coordinator indicated that all teachers regarded reading text online as requiring different skills from paper-text reading.

WEB-TEXT READING VERSUS PAPER-TEXT READING

Corbel's (1999) categories for comparing Web text and paper text under four headings – Orientation, Interaction (Searching and Navigation), Modification, and Integration – were used in this study.

ORIENTATION

Orientation means the 'visuality in the content of electronic texts' (Corbel 1999: 122) There are two kinds of orientation – the 'physicality' (p 119) which is the font, size, and general presentation of the text and the 'visual features' (p 119) which are the pictures, charts, and graphs used.

Physicality

In both paper and Web-text environments, the reader can judge the size of the document from page numbers, and find the section of text required by locating headings and using the physicality of the paper, or the bottom toolbar for Web text, to find out how many pages are in the document. The important difference between paper text and Web text orientation is what Corbel describes as 'visual features' (p 119) that occur in the digital environment, some of which have no counterpart on paper. These features allow actions such as scrolling, moving forward and back by arrow through different websites, importing bookmarked websites to 'Your Favourites' address book and so on. These features require additional skill levels or, as Corbel warns, 'result in ineffective online work that is the result of the carrying over of paper-based concepts' (p 119). Inadequate knowledge of these skills can result in less effective reading in the online environment.

Visual features

Both paper and Web texts possess visual elements – pictures, charts and graphs. The major difference in electronic texts is that visual forms may contain fully integrated sound and moving images which are known as multimodal texts (Burnett 2002; Kress 1997). Web reading requires a high level of visual literacy skill to enable the student to comprehend these multimedia components. These visual tools are what Gurak (2001: 56) terms ‘credibility-boosting devices’ that ‘make everything look real’. They require a degree of careful analysis by both students and teachers; teachers should not assume that viewing is reading. As Burnett (2002: 286) states, ‘It is clear that viewing and reading are related activities but they are clearly not the same’. Successful Web-text reading requires a high degree of evaluation of both text and non-text (graphics and multimedia) as students must discern between important visual images and merely beautification of a site by pictures, photographs and graphics (Kress 1997). The visual literacy skills when reading Web text can provide more opportunities to enhance differentiated learning. Many sites’ use of colour and image can appeal to different levels of reading ability in the classroom, and some more visual learners, who prefer image-based learning styles of reading, can benefit. As Gurak says, ‘this mixed palette means that people with various levels of reading ability, visual acuity and comprehension can be reached’ (2001: 35).

The evaluation of non-textual, or visual features is crucial to Web literacy. Visual elements can operate to distract many readers, and make it difficult for many students to find written information on the Web, particularly for students who are not confident using the Internet. This is not to suggest that written text is of greater importance on a website than images, but, rather, that our students need explicit instruction in how to make sense of, and decode, the image so that they do not merely regard it as an ‘illustration’ (see Kress 1997: 58 for a description of the ‘tectonic shift’ from written to visual modes). Many sites have a vast array of visual images which are the focal points of the site, where ‘the image as well as the text convey pertinent information’ (Sorapure et al 1998: 417). There may be scant written text, as the website is designed to appeal to visual learners. As Bolter (1998: 7) points out: ‘literacy in electronic environments may have more to do with the production and consumption of images than the reading and writing of either hypertextual or linear prose’. It is necessary that we, as responsible teachers, incorporate evaluation of multimedia components into our teaching to assist students in discerning credible, reliable and valid visual elements. Although evaluation of images and visual elements has always been part of paper-text reading strategies, we need to expand the student consciousness of the possible disparity of text and visual images on a website. ‘Students need to be made aware of the possible ways visual infor-

mation can be manipulated ... Drawings and photographs can manipulate the eye through tricks of perspective and visual illusions' (Sorapure et al 1998: 418).

INTERACTION

Corbel (1999) divides Interaction into two subcategories: Searching and Navigation.

Searching

Searching is the technique used to find relevant text in both the paper and online environments. Teachers in the study noted that students often appeared to use different searching techniques in the Internet environment compared to the paper-text environment. Students appeared to resort to 'channel surfing' (Burbules and Callister 1996: 41) where they searched the Internet in a random manner – in short bursts with no overall sense of coherence to the search. Students appeared to lack focus and a sense of purpose on the Internet, which they could demonstrate in the paper-text environment. As students became increasingly frustrated, many readers simply 'opted out of the process in frustration' (Slatin 1991: 64). This was confirmed by student comments in the computer laboratory, such as 'In books you know where to go, but on the Internet you're playing by chance' and, 'Sometimes I would find completely unrelated information, like while I was searching A B Paterson, I found things like Paterson care-restorers and A B Fridges!'

Corbel (1999) states that 'surfing' occurs in both digital and paper environments and should 'only be used for Web documents that function like magazines which we surf and browse on paper as well' (p 120). Teachers in this study stated that students surfed a variety of documents from government publications, historical society records and similar official public records to meet immediate, directed informational needs as set by the project. Students were observed 'channel surfing' a variety of such sources online, but did not use this technique in the paper environment, as in the latter environment they appeared to have a clearer sense of how to locate the paper-based text they sought. Twenty-three students also used a search mechanism unique to the digital world (the full text search, for example, to locate and print out information on Australian astronaut Andy Thomas's role on the Mir space station from the Nasa site – <http://www.nasa.gov>).

Navigating

Corbel (1999: 119–20) considers that online text is 'modular' or displayed as chunks or sections similar to many paper texts. Many students believed finding text on the Internet was different, and often more difficult, than in paper mode.

The greatest difficulty teachers and students perceived was that navigation problems occurred in refining the search. Students did not break down their navigation into smaller chunks of text and were observed becoming easily distracted from the focus questions they had set when following an interesting, but unrelated link. These students often finished the computer class with little tangible progress in the set tasks. This is not to suggest that learning did not occur, but students displayed very real frustration with the limited progress in the assignment. As one of the students said, 'I work hard all class but at the end, the Net has given me *nothing!*' (student emphasis). Thus teachers and students considered a range of additional reading strategies were needed in the Web-text environment (see Sutherland-Smith 2002 for a discussion of Web reading strategies).

MODIFICATION

When students changed paper-text copy by amending or annotating, it was a 'cut and paste' that was clear to the naked eye. However, when students modified online text by downloading images from the Internet or amending graphs created in Microsoft Excel and placing them in Powerpoint presentations, these changes to the original were not clearly delineated. As Corbel says, 'this flexibility and fluidity is in sharp contrast to the fixed paper-based text' (1999: 121). Students and teachers considered Web modification of text enhanced presentations, and students clearly preferred downloading colour images rather than photocopying images from paper sources. Another student in the study said, 'Who wants to see a project with black and white pictures! I mean, you know, it needs to be colourful or people won't take notice'. Modification does not only apply to physical aspects of text but also to the approach to text as 'readers and texts are literally, as well as metaphorically, interacting' (Corbel 1999: 130). Reading Web-based text can be interactive and the reader can add, change or move text. In many cases, the reader can modify text when 'talking back' to the writer of text, the creator of a Web page, or the post-master of a discussion group.

Conclusion

The Web requires rethinking our approach to literacy practice and offers us, as teachers, an opportunity to be active in evolving notions of literacy embracing new technologies. The Web invites a nonlinear, nonsequential, interactive medium for students, and reading skills must incorporate strategies to deal with multimedia and visual elements. We need to become competent at 'critiquing, challenging and anticipating how these technologies are designed, implemented and used' (Gurak 2001: 11) if we are to assist our students. The Internet is a

gateway to content, and Web literacy provides a digital bridge to use in becoming 'literate beings' in the twenty-first century.

NOTE

- 1 Technoliteracy is a term coined by Lankshear, Snyder with Green (2000) in *Teachers and technoliteracy: Managing literacy, technology and learning in schools*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin

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Appendix

INTRODUCTION TO THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

My name is Wendy Sutherland-Smith and I would like to find out how you use books and the Internet for your reading research in projects set at school. I would appreciate it if you could fill in the answers to this questionnaire. Filling in this questionnaire is voluntary.

SECTION 1: PERSONAL INFORMATION

Please tick the box or write in the information in the space provided

- 1 Are you: Male Female
- 2 What is your age group?
 18–20 21–25 26–30 31–40 41–50
- 3 What is your country of birth?
- 4 What is your first language?
- 5 Do you speak any other languages (do not include English)? If so, what other languages do you speak?
- 6 Have you studied in an English speaking country before this course? Please circle the correct answer Yes / No

If the answer to question 6 was No, please go to question 8.

- 7 Please name the country you have studied English in before and give the years you studied there, as well as the course you studied.
 Name of country Years studied there
 Course

SECTION 2: AT SCHOOL IN YOUR HOME COUNTRY

All the questions in section 2 relate to your schooling in your home country only.

- 8 At what age did you start school?
- 9 How old were you when you started studying English at school?
- 10 Was English a compulsory subject in your secondary school?
 Please circle the correct answer Yes / No
- 11 In what year did you complete secondary schooling?.....

Once every couple of weeks

Once a semester

I do not use the Internet

SECTION 4: THE CLARITY OF THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please circle the answer that most describes how clear this questionnaire was to you. 'Clear' simply means how easy the questions were to understand. If there were any questions you did not understand, please write the question number down in the space provided.

28 It was **all** clear to me

It was **mostly** clear to me

Some of it was clear to me

Not much of it was clear to me

None of this questionnaire was clear to me

If questions were unclear, please write down the number of the question.

.....

Thank you very much for your participation.

Wendy