Didactic patterns for electronic materials in the teaching of interculturalism through literature: the experience of the research group LEETHi

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Abstract

This paper is a descriptive summary of a research project on blended learning in the Faculty of Arts at the University Complutense Madrid. The project was conducted as action research in 2002-06 by the research group LEETHi. LEETHi's projects focus on the teaching of literature from an intercultural perspective while helping to develop new media competence. The project also addresses – among other objectives – the intercultural potential of literary tests used in second language acquisition where their practical applications include the development and use of digital material for the study of European literatures with the integration of multiple languages and perspectives. A central issue is the potential of blended learning (i.e. the integration of e-learning and contact learning) and the development of autonomy and communication between students and instructor. The online scenario focuses on the performance of tasks following sociocultural and constructivist theories and concepts borrowed from research on multimodality.

Keywords: European literatures, Interculturalism, Hypertext, Didactic patterns for Electronic Materials

1 Introduction

In recent years changes brought about by the spread of new technologies for information and communication are imposing new and dynamic alternatives for the acquisition of knowledge and its transmission.[1] More and more countries are developing models for Information Literacy integral to educational curricula. A great emphasis on information and information technology within the work force has created the need to form professional profiles competent in research processes, the management of information,

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1. Knowledge and information are vital components in cultural formation because every society is formed around certain shared concepts.

and the use of technological know-how. Information literacy, knowledge mobility, and knowledge flexibility patterns are key factors for the employability of future graduates of higher learning who are expected to be competent in the use of new technologies and knowledge management. In addition, the notions and objectives of the European Space of Higher Education are very much in the same direction in order to support the necessities of research and teaching arising in the current situation of the European Union on societal, economic, educational, industrial and technological levels.

Mobility is also a key factor in the introduction of new technologies through e-learning and b-learning (blended learning). It is a fact, at least in the case of Spanish universities, that we no longer have full-time students. Fifty-three per cent of our undergraduate students are employed part-time in order to pay for fees and living expenses because they lack social aid (see ANECA sources in references); the distribution of working students involved the case study explored here showed that 20% of 19-year-old students work. For this reason, at Complutense University, the blended learning[2] approach is becoming a new and advantageous tool in pedagogy.

The work developed by the research group LEETHi (Literaturas Españolas y Europeas del Texto al Hipertexto) at Complutense aims to address the potential role that literature can play with regard to a European knowledge-based society and its educational, ethical, and societal implications. They also seek to identify the contribution of b-learning environments to the educational challenges within Europe and to the development of shifting definitions of intercultural citizenship.[3] Online environments include the possibilities of synchronous and asynchronous methods of student collaboration and employ other media extensions such as sound, animation, and video incorporated in text, for both the presentation and the negotiation of information. Hence, LEETHi's hypertexts are designed to promote intercultural approaches through the teaching of literature and reading. Learning to deal with the 'other' in literature and the examples we read in literature can make us aware of our own historical specificities and help us value ourselves as well as value the 'other.'

2 LEETHI: Literaturas Españolas y Europeas del Texto al Hipertexto

LEETHi was born in 2001, integrating a group of scholars from the Faculty of Humanities and Education at Complutense University Madrid. From different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and consequently with diverse epistemological and methodological perspectives, the group shared, nevertheless, an interest in the challenges posed by the study and teaching of literature in today's Europe. LEETHi's critical reflection is founded upon:

1.   A belief in multiple citizenship definitions, for LEETHi understands reality as a

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2. Blended learning is the combination of multiple approaches to learning. For example: self-paced, collaborative, or inquiry-based study and it includes the use of online and physical resources.

3. Intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication tries to understand how people from different cultures communicate with each other and how better means of negotiating conflict can be achieved. The work of Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998, 2003) is particularly interesting because it bridges comparative literature and cultural studies providing a framework for the definition of interculturalism as a "dialogue" between cultures.

changing and dynamic process where the individual is defined within a plurality of times and spaces (genre, language, group, etc.), multiple and intercultural.

2. An understanding of cultures as open to contacts, interferences, crossroads and meeting points within a dense network of informational structures and reminiscences. To LEETHi, transnational paradigms for the study of literature are essential in a Europe rich in multiple and plural cultures and languages. Thus, hypermedia designed by the group seeks to generate the feeling of belonging not to a single space but to a dynamic network of 'translations' and cultural hybrids/hybridities.

3. The belief in the intrinsic value of reading as a cognitive and meta-cognitive activity and thus of the reading of literatures as intercultural vehicles.

4. The use of hypertextual structures as mental and cognitive models that offer the possibility of network representation. However, it is acknowledged that not all hypertexts benefit from a user-based environment that multiplies theoretical, methodological, and educational possibilities.

5. The development of collaborative learning spaces which, through the use of hypertext, can help us abandon traditional linear models, moving towards associative reading models and non hierarchical notions in the processes of teaching and learning.

Thus, LEETHi intends to offer a diversity of viewpoints within an integrative vision for the study of literatures; a conscious understanding of the textual mechanisms that allow the construction of meaning, whether ideological, symbolic, or aesthetic. LEETHi considers reading a communicative experience and a productive and not a receptive skill, a process that escapes spatial and temporal borders and promotes dialogical interactions not only between reader and text, but also between cultures within the social interaction of the virtual and face-to-face classroom.

LEETHi's first initiative, *Guias de lectura* (Reading Guides), <http://www.ucm.es/info/guias/indexdom.htm>, involved a collaborative project among the different areas in language studies within the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Education at Complutense University. The study was conducted as action research between 2002-2006 and it was a pioneer act in its inter-departmental presentation within heterogeneous faculties at Complutense. The design of the Web promotes a constructivist approach (see Lefoe, 1998) that sought to strike a balance between the development of conceptual knowledge, attitudes, and the acquisition of abilities that bring students closer to social and professional contexts and to teaching them to transfer the results of their learning to other areas.

3 Theoretical framework

Guías de lectura has been a unique b-learning experience that enabled instructors involved in the project, as well as their students, to come into contact with the possibilities of hypermedia technologies used to complement face-to face learning environments. Tasks were organized which encouraged cross-readings, such as the transversal perspectives that could be found in different works or comparative approaches to the study of cultural differences among works in European literatures.
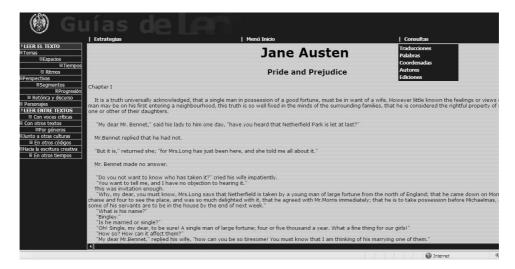
Fig. 1. Reading tasks

They sought not only to treat information, that is, question, research, find meaning, develop ideas, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, solve problems, but also to communicate, transfer information, and use it in making decisions in an effective and responsible way by applying it to concrete social situations.

Hypermedia, as an online learning resource, is only given shape and meaning through user interaction (see Nielsen, 1995; Fisher & Mandl, 1989). Student autonomy is achieved through experimental learning, thus becoming a course strategy that concerns the entire curriculum, its materials, tasks, and learning arrangements with dialogue between instructor and students being especially important (on this, see Kupetz, 2001: 53). Autonomy depends upon, but also develops and expands, the students' capacity for critical reflection, decision making, and independent action (see Little, 1999: 77). Previous approaches to tasks, based on psycholinguistic approaches, (see, e.g., Nunan, 1989: 10; Skehan, 1998a: 95; Yule, 1997; Hampel, 2006: 109) have focused on the internalization of knowledge and, therefore, failed to uncover a key factor which also contributes to task resolution: the fact that knowledge is shared, transmitted, and experienced in interaction. Thus, interactivity is an essential feature of this framework for it symbiotically links the information data and media input with the range, scope, accessibility, and interactive potential of embedded user tasks and achievable goals (output), bringing forth the need for a satisfactory mapping between the system's interactive potentiality and the user's ability to react to it.

One of the major problems facing foreign language teaching lies in the fact that languages are increasingly reduced to being considered merely as a means of communication and not representational and critical exponents of their foreign cultures. This reductionist understanding of the essence and relevance of foreign languages has deprived language learning of its traditional cultural base. Hémard's (2006) and Ellis's (2000) work shows that the use of hypermedia alone may not generate increased motivation and/or cultural competence. This is where the introduction of the reading of literary works in second language acquisition becomes a crucial element in providing

the necessary socio-cultural background and developing the intercultural elements (as suggested, for example, in the programs of the European Space of Higher Education).

The educational and cultural studies background of LEETHi's members has encouraged research particularly in the areas of cross-cultural readings and intercultural awareness which involve the development of a network of interdisciplinary fields and the coordination of transversal projects mainly focusing on questions such as self-representation, citizenship, identity, migration, discrimination, tolerance, etc. Thus, the two web sites designed by the group have tried to promote the use of categories based on interconnection, plurality, etc., and based on the possibilities of hypertextual representation (http://www.ucm.es/info/leethi/ & http://www.ucm.es/info/guias/indexdom.htm). Readers/users are assumed participants and therefore the potential targets for these hypertexts that will attempt to refocus their mental background to help them reflect critically upon the implications that their/our own experiences and practices will have on the complexities of intercultural education when considered within the scope of citizenship education.

Regarding the incorporation into the curricula of both the epistemological and technical advantages of the information sciences and technologies, research has revealed that the development of information literacy is more effective when it forms part of the curricula and is introduced into the classroom and not dealt with apart from the rest of the learning resources (see, e.g., Yager & Roy, 1993; Furstenberg, 1997). Thus, more and more institutions of higher learning and organizations are devoted to promoting and enhancing practical applications of information literacy programs such as virtual trips, CyberGuides, WebQuests, Miniquests, etc. (see, e.g., Virkus, 2003; Basili, 2003) and implementing transversal actions of b-learning (i.e., the integration of e-learning and contact learning; see López-Varela, 2006b).

Most of the above mentioned models refer to Bloom's 1956 *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* that brings out six levels of educational objectives (regardless of the subject) corresponding to intellectual operations from the simplest level (remembering) to the more complex (creating) (see Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). At a cognitive level Bloom's taxonomy could be transferred into two levels of cognition related to learning. A basic level, centred on conceptual knowledge and referring to a descriptive kind of learning (operations such as recognising, identifying, defining, describing, naming, etc.) linked to the two first objectives: remembering and understanding. This pre-supposes that students are capable of structuring their factual knowledge in their professional area. The second level corresponds to a more complex learning in which concepts are used in the context of application, analysis, synthesis or evaluation activities, relating to the four other objectives of Bloom: applying, analysing, evaluating and creating. Thus, the second level aims at developing a series of actions, deriving from learned concepts and involving a higher level of activity in which information is used to achieve professional behaviour (arguing, deciding, constructing, etc.).

Many of these models are constructed following the narrative structure of the trip or excursion, a kind of guided tour arranged by the educator, but one that allows students sufficient freedom to choose their own path so that they may acquire a learning experience that is unique for each one of them. Some of their advantages are:

- They can grant access to information that is not generally available to students, such as a visit to a specific museum, a field trip abroad, etc.

- In terms of cost effectiveness, they save time and resources and students bring back facts and information in several forms of media.
- They can also become important intercultural tools, since they offer multiple perspectives on an issue, which facilitate in-depth knowledge and cooperative learning experiences.
- They provide the opportunity to see authentic situations, and it is well-known that real-world experiences can help boost motivation levels in the classroom.
- Hypermedia formats (text, graphics, photographs, video clips, links to other places on the World Wide Web) provide tutors with a framework for research hypotheses.
- Students take on an active role in the classroom because these models allow them to work at their own pace (flexibility). In addition, the speed of students' responses could be monitored for contrastive analysis and research.
- They enhance motivation by providing immediate feedback.
- They encourage self-assessment. The European Portfolio, Weblogs, etc. allow students to keep a kind of diary where they can reflect upon their processes of learning thus providing individual feedback.
- They promote responsibility by helping students to make informed choices, therefore integrating reception and production.
- They promote the students' own accountability and responsibility in the learning process as well as their freedom to stimulate individual initiative, thus generating engagement.
- Web-based communication applications such as chats, e-mailing, discussion forums, videoconferencing, etc., can encourage collaborative work and a dialogue about learning.
- They can integrate knowledge from various fields with a special focus on theoretical framework and thinking.

As indicated above, the theoretical foundation of many of these models is found in constructivism and their main objective is to help students to develop autonomy, that is, to teach students to set their own learning agenda and take responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluating particular learning activities and the learning process overall (on constructivism, see, e.g., Riegler, 1996)

In the case of hypermedia designed for second language acquisition, much influenced by psycholinguistic approaches, research has focused on the development of tasks as devices that can guide students to engage in certain types of information processing that are believed to be important for effective language acquisition and use. This is so because tasks have certain properties that induce learners to engage in the learning process through negotiation and interaction with another person (oral tasks) or texts (reading tasks). Ellis (2000: 200) includes a number of features that are likely to encourage negotiation:

- Information exchange required
- Two-way information gap
- Closed outcome
- Non-familiar task
- Human/ethical topic
- Narrative discourse (vs. description/expository)
- Context-free, involving detailed information

Constructivist approaches to tasks are based on psycholinguistic approaches deriving from the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1981) and developed by Leont'ev (1981) and Kern, Ware and Warschauer (2004). Constructivism is also, perhaps even mainly, rooted in the work of scholars such as Maturana, Varela, von Foerster, von Glasersfeld, Schmidt, etc. (see the Riegler reference above or see Steven Tötösy 1969-1995).

These approaches predicate that technological applications mediate thought processes and, by extension, human activity (Nardi, 1996). More specifically, it has been argued (Hémard, 2006) that artefacts in the larger sense, including machines, instruments, sign systems, methods, procedures, and work organisations as well as established practices affect, through a process of internalisation, resulting mental processes. Hémard's work evaluates hypermedia structures as means of improving language learning strategies and motivation and claims that it is important to pay attention to the sociocultural perspective. In my opinion individual and collective consciousness are situated phenomena which evolve dynamically with practice and are transformed in the process by artefacts. This suggests that there is more to second language learning than just acquiring a language, for it involves the acquisition of its culturally-related content. One of the major problems facing foreign language teaching lies in the fact that languages are increasingly reduced to being considered merely as a means of communication and not representational and critical exponents of their foreign cultures. This reductionist understanding of the essence and relevance of foreign language acquisition has deprived language learning of its traditional cultural base. In addition, on the grounds of evidence from evaluation of hypermedia interfaces over the last ten years, Hémard's work shows that the use of hypermedia alone may not generate increased motivation. As Ellis (2000: 200) has noted, the human/ethical component is a key factor. And this is where the introduction of literary works in second language acquisition becomes a crucial element for providing the necessary socio-cultural background and developing the intercultural elements as proposed by the program of the European Space of Higher Education.

4 An analysis of *Guías de Lectura* (Reading Guides)

As introduced above, the work of LEETHi combines integrated interactive e-learning and a contact learning scenario (blended learning): it offers instruction and scaffolding particularly at the beginning of the course. Autonomy is thus developed during the course as one of the course strategies. So, the group has promoted in its program:

- The creation of teaching materials and participation in virtual campuses, together with the development of new forms of evaluation, tutorials etc., and participation in the Complutense University's b-learning platform known as "Virtual Campus" (https://www.ucm.es/info/uatd/CVUCM/index.php).
- The design of curricular actions that promote both the development of conceptual knowledge and attitudes and the acquisition of abilities that bring the students closer to social and professional contexts, teaching them to mobilize resources and transfer the results of their learning to other areas (http://www.ucm.es/info/fgu/directorio.htm & http://www.ucm.es/info/FInglesa/otros_cursos.htm).
- The development of student autonomy through teaching methodologies promoting research and creativity processes and cooperation among students.

- An emphasis on intercultural approaches in language teaching with hypermedia support.
- The encouragement and integration of literary readings in the classroom following the trend of work carried out at the *European Centre for Modern Languages* (http://www.ecml.at/) that has found how texts employed in class can contribute to the development of intercultural consciousness and practices.

In order to achieve these objectives the group based its educational strategy on two foundations:

- Reading: a communication process that escapes spatial and temporal borders and promotes dialogical interactions. Employing reception theory, Fenner (2001) argues for reading as a communicative experience and as a productive rather than a receptive skill. Based on a specific approach, reading literature in the target language is seen as a dialectic dialogue between reader and text as well as between two cultures within the social interaction of the classroom. Fenner investigates such dialogic encounters from a hermeneutical point of view where one aspect of communication and development is adjusting attitudes and views between individuals and between cultures and through this process cultural awareness is enhanced. Thus the reading process is a hermeneutical process comparable to the learning process.
- The use of new technologies which, as recent literature has also shown,[4] increases students' intercultural awareness, since new media technologies use interactive forms of communication, and heightens motivation because students are free to interact with other students and find their own resources on the Web. The internet's communicative functionalities such as hypertext, chats, discussion forums, videoconferencing, etc., enable information to be moved, transformed, and manipulated. Hypermedia tools allow students to participate in a cooperative learning process and a continuous interaction with the different agents of the system: student/instructor, student/student.

Further, LEETHi promotes the design of curricular actions based on b-learning approaches that, in turn, encourage:

- Selection of the theme or question to be explored
- Formulation, that is, to define a perspective centered around the information found
- Recollection or recompilation and documentation of the information around the central theme or problem
- Individual and group work
- Analysis of a task or project and identification of themes and questions involved
- Presentation and transference of results;
- Evaluation or reflection about the whole learning process and learning content.

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4. For a catalogue of publications see: http://book.coe.int/EN/ficheouvrage.php? PAGEID=39&lang=EN&theme_catalogue=120243, particularly Information and Communication Technologies in Vocationally Oriented Language Learning

These curricular actions intend to strike a balance between the development of conceptual knowledge, attitudes, and the acquisition of abilities that bring students closer to social and professional contexts, teaching them to mobilize resources and transfer the results of their learning to other areas. It also encourages group collaboration and requires new forms of student assessment, where students demonstrate their skills, assess their own learning, and evaluate the processes by which their learning is achieved (preparing portfolios, research logs, etc.).

In LEETHi, we noticed that the associative mechanisms facilitated by hypermedia technologies could be focused on helping to develop complex cognitive mechanisms for storage and access of information, thus staging the learning process and the production of ideological, symbolic, and aesthetic meaning in a concrete context. Students could be made conscious of their learning processes, hence facilitating the integration of information in long-term memory structures. Thus, students were able to select their own learning path and timing in accessing information and performing the suggested tasks. The principal concern was the dialogical quality of literature in general, which speaks across different cultures, across space and across time, since literature provides a basis for our historical memories. This focus on learning through research and task-development allows learning from questions and suggestions, materials and relations, with *competence* going hand in hand with *performance*.

As seen in the graphic, tasks are grouped around two main axes, *Leer el texto* (reading the text) y *Leer entre textos*, (reading across texts), and they are listed on the vertical margin of the webpage. This division shows the dialogical quality of tasks and our methodological approach, since tasks listed within *Reading across texts* place their emphasis on relational activities and the breaking of limitation and borders within texts[5] Tasks listed within *Reading the text* are grouped under the following categories: *themes, characters, rhetoric, progression, segments, perspectives, rhythms, times,* and *spaces. Reading across texts* focuses on the development of intercultural readings and includes the following subsections: *with other texts* (allows connections with other texts from the same period), *in other times* (expands these correspondences to other texts from the past), *across genres* (provides comparative perspectives across different literary genres), *across codes* (includes comparison across multimedia texts, that is the world of drama, art, cinema, etc.), *across cultures* (focuses on intercultural aspects in particular).

The horizontal axis provides additional information for the resolution of tasks. *Consultas* (References) includes additional bibliography, whether in printed or online form, *Coordenadas* (Coordinates) are historical and literary references, *Ediciones* (Editions) presents references to the most important editions of the work analyzed. The Menu *Estrategias* (Strategies) provides methodological advice and additional research material (access to selected online dictionaries and resources) to help with the performance of the tasks. It includes the sections: *how to search, how to get organized, how to write, how to judge results*.

In LEETHi we found that the use of this hypertext tool and its accompanying b-learning strategies have encouraged learning processes in accordance with the

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5. Traditionally, "text" refers to words only; here, I am using the notion of text in a wider context of cultural production including traditional 'text', visual media, new media, etc.

requirements and suggestions of the European Space of Higher Education program, more specifically:

- Students' tasks are more organized in terms of both content and structure, probably because students receive orientation step by step, while maintaining their freedom of choice.
- The reading strategies developed for our web site have encouraged student autonomy, a cooperative relationship between instructor/students and students/students and a translocal learning-research process, appropriate to specific needs and specific times in a process that stimulates both creativity and the transferability of learning results.
- Students are more aware of the reading level – cognitive, symbolic, ideological, aesthetic – of a given text.
- The multimediality integral to the hypermedia tools allow sequential or simultaneous access to different kinds of information, thus multiplying the communicational capacity of texts.
- LEETHi's hypertextual model obliges the user to make a choice, to decide his/her itinerary. It introduces systematic questioning within the unity of the text, encourages argumentation, and shows that the chain of reading and thinking is not unidirectional but relational.
- Students feel the need to consult bibliographic sources through the web site's selection of links to the university's library.
- In addition to in-class group work, the relational aspects and reading strategies of our web site have contributed to the creation of socially responsible citizens by showing that information is generated through a socially-constructed process and that the results of any research, whose aim is to improve human conditions, should be transferred to other areas of our lives.
- Our tool helps students achieve cooperative abilities, make decisions, and transfer their learning to professional and social areas. Students learn in dynamic research situations where information constantly changes and learn to manage information excess and select pertinent resources, to find meaning for themselves among the diverse and numerous information resources.
- Assessment results are above average, compared to traditional teaching methodologies and motivation levels have increased.
- The number of face-to face tutorials decreases while the number of on-line contacts increases and multiplies.

There have also been some negative findings:

- Students prefer reading paths with the lowest number of link connections. We interpret this as a symptom of the lack of relational reading abilities of the students.
- Similarly, they tend to choose the more linear and traditional tasks, probably because of the exceptional and pioneering character of our program.
- Only on a very gradual basis do they employ the online dictionaries that can be accessed from the web site. Printed sources are still preferred.

4 Case Study: English Prose Fiction taught using a b-learning approach
with *Guías de Lectura*

As mentioned above, the project *Guias de Lectura* involved a collaborative project among the different areas in language studies within the Faculty of Arts at Complutense University. The following lines refer to the specific experience of English Prose Fiction, an annual subject taught in the first year of English Studies at Complutense. The hypermedia tool implemented to support in-class learning was *Guías de lectura* [http://www.ucm.es/info/guias/indexdom.htm], a cyberguide described above. The learning process followed the following steps:

- Randomized exploration of the web site
- Individual selection of the theme or question to be explored or task to be performed
- Formulation, that is, to define a perspective centered around the information found
- Recollection and documentation of information around the chosen task
- In-class group work analysing information found
- Individual analysis of the task and identification of themes and questions involved
- Individual written presentation of results (transference 1)
- In-class group presentation of results (transference 2)
- Evaluation or reflection about the whole learning process and learning content (questionnaire, report or weblog)

The central issue considered was the potential of a blended-learning environment for developing autonomy together with the intercultural aspects already indicated. The project's practical applications were the development and use of digital material as well as online communication among students and instructor. Because students had access to all class materials from the beginning, class attendance was encouraged, and compulsory for those wishing to follow continuous assessment. Data about how the tasks worked in practice was collected employing quantitative and qualitative measures: tutorial observation, e-mail recordings, questionnaires (one early printed questionnaire explored specific socio-cultural and educational characteristics, together with students' data management and word-processing abilities); monthly online questionnaires on the progress of the learning process [see at http://evaluacion.sim.ucm.es/evalclose/validacion.aspx]), interviews, students' weblogs [using http://www.blogger.com/] and students' European Language Portfolio [see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/portfolio/].

The aim of the guided trip in search of information through *Guías de Lectura* was not only to help students to acquire conceptual knowledge but also to foster the development of procedural knowledge in the learning loop. Students were, therefore, encouraged to share information with other members of their research group and because our tool had some interactive deficiencies we used a b-learning approach mixing two kinds of learning environments:

1. The use of the cyberguide to provide information and guide students through the proposed tasks.
2. A collaborative approach based on in-class group interaction and the distribution of roles (generally 4-5 members with rotating shared roles of facilitator and

writer; the facilitator is in charge of the coordination of the negotiation taking place during conversation; the writer keeps a historical record of all interactions, themes, topics, questions treated etc., acting as the memory of the group).

The process was as follows: students suggested questions after watching a video clip in the classroom; these questions encouraged them to go on to read the original extract in the cyberguide designed for the course; the extract directed them to questions on vocabulary, themes, structural aspects of the text, etc., also found in *Guías de Lectura*; finally, in order to answer the question(s) that each individual student selected according to his/her interests, the guide directed them to the library where the complete work could be consulted. An on-line library was also provided to facilitate the task of finding relevant passages to illustrate the subject matter chosen by the student. Information was then analysed through group interaction and then students individually prepared their own research papers, and later shared their results with the rest of the class. Only few students employed weblogs for the transference of their findings, most of them preferring traditional printed reports. At the beginning some also had difficulty in filling in the on-line monthly questionnaires.

In 2005-06 there were 52 students on the English Prose Fiction course. About 20% of those dropped out at different stages of the academic year because they were unable to meet the requirements of the b-learning environment: some could not use the online application nor answer the online questionnaires and others thought that following this kind of course required too much effort. Of those who took the course (35), only 20 completed all the required online questionnaires from which the following data are extracted:[6]

- 85% of the students were female and 80% were 19 years old.
- 40% indicated that they dedicated between 1 and 4 hours a week to the development of tasks; 20% dedicated between 4 and 7 hours while 30% dedicated between 7 and 10 hours a week to performing the required tasks (one task per month that involved reading a complete work of one the authors discussed in the course, transferring information on the chosen task in written and oral form to the rest of their classmates in the form of informal group discussion and paper presentation).
- 80% of students came to class regularly.
- With regard to the students' evaluation of the course, the data indicates that 45% of students rated this subject as "very important", 35% found it "OK", and 15% found it "very important".
- 45% of students found that the on-line materials and information provided, including assessment criteria, were very good. These also found that classes were well organized and structured and that in-class sessions were useful. Students also mentioned that the reference books suggested were useful.

We must bear in mind that this is a first-year course and the fist questionnaire distributed

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6. Admittedly, the size of the sample for the analysis is small: it is a sample provided by Complutense University's Office for the Evaluation of Educational Innovation and Research Results.

to students showed that around 20% did not have access to a computer at home; some did not have any knowledge of computer applications and 40% did not even use e-mail. By the end of the academic year this number was reduced to 3% still not owning their own computer although all of them had an e-mail address for communication with other students and the instructor. The most relevant aspect, however, was the student-student and student-instructor relationship: 90% of students found the possibility of having on-line contact with the instructor at all times "excellent". They also found the sharing of information in on-line forums useful. The same number of students found seminars and tutorials "very useful". One negative aspect of the experiment was the number of students who dropped the course.

5 Further research

In LEETHi our current research focusses on a comprehensive hypermedia dynamic space [http://www.ucm.es/info/leethi/index.php (under construction)], conceived as a meeting point for different European identities and cultures; an interface articulating the opening of borders and limits towards hybrid spaces where we can encounter others. Interculturality, interdisciplinarity, and a plurality of languages and world conceptions form part of this complex model which, in line with European programs such as *Culture and Language Integrated Learning*, seeks to formalize the simultaneous acquisition of linguistic and literary competence, information literacy and procedural and performative abilities within a context of a development and strengthening of intercultural and social values.

The mechanism of representation of a model such as this needs a hypertextual structure which would include cognitive and philosophical dimensions of the phenomenon of multi- and interculturalism, together with a didactic and pedagogic dimension which, in turn, can help to develop positive values in the face of diversity. In this sense, educational research in language learning developed for European Convergence has shown that the building of autonomy as a conscious metacognitive activity permits a reflection on one's own language that gives rise to the emergence of a multicultural consciousness (see Fenner, 1998 and 2001). The literary event becomes an exceptional meeting space, a dialogic crossroad of readings that help to build what we have been, what we are and what we want to become. The affirmation of identity – individual, historical, social, cultural, national – is, for LEETHi, a space of dialogic learning, of exchange of experiences with everything that is somehow other and different (other languages, other cultures, other disciplines).

Work in and with the above concept is open and dynamic, does not follow unidirectional communicative and cognitive paths, it is a constructed, multiple, and simultaneously bounded and unbounded space that allows the visualization of different categories of problems (one than can be deconstructed, fragmented, parceled out for their comprehension), it is a complex combination of varied positions which can be manipulated by the user around a central axis while maintaining different faces in the bordering extremes.

Systems, nations, intercultures, transliteratures, histories and identities are the shifting combinatory concepts, not global but "glocal" (I borrow Roland Robertson's (1995) concept), moving between centre and periphery. Bidimensional on the screen, the model

wants to generate, in its mobility, three-dimensional mental projections; a systemic configuration around two combinatory axes: on the one hand the hypertextual representational and cognitive structure and on the other the didactic one that helps to implement the theoretical model and transforms it into concrete performances of autonomous learning.

Nodes and links, as invariant textual moments, bind the different pages within the hypertext, supplying local stability within the global flux. Each *lexia*, to use G.P. Landow's term (2004, 2006), builds key associative prospects of internal coherence and consistency and simultaneously demolishes them, placing the user at the limit of the textual moment and pushing him/her towards a new discursive territory. The hypertextual space is always a relative subjective read-writable space, configured by the reader/user along his/her chosen path. The relativism of the model is the price to pay for allowing the user the consciousness of his/her decisions, something that can only be achieved if one is able to situate oneself simultaneously within and without the space of representation. On the other hand, any non-deterministic model forces us to make decisions and situate ourselves both cognitively and discursively, generating conducts of responsibility that may not be gratifying and which we may want to avoid for the sake of convenience. Autonomy and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. The student/user can, however, take the easy way out and access the library directly in order to contemplate all the documents listed in alphabetical order. S/he can also use the key-words search engine to find what they need.

6 Conclusions

LEETHi intends to offer students a diversity of viewpoints within an integrative vision for the study of literatures and a conscious understanding of the textual mechanisms that allow for the construction of meaning, whether ideological, symbolic, and/or aesthetic. We consider reading as a communicative experience and as a productive rather than a receptive skill, a process that escapes spatial and temporal borders and promotes dialogical interactions not only between reader and text, but also between cultures within the social interaction of the virtual and face-to-face classroom.

The educational and cultural studies background of LEETHi members has encouraged research particularly in the areas of cross-cultural readings and intercultural awareness which involve the development of a network of interdisciplinary fields and the coordination of transversal projects mainly focusing on questions such as self-representation, citizenship, identity, migration, discrimination, tolerance, etc. Thus, the web sites designed by LEETHi are intended to promote the use of categories based on interconnection, plurality, etc., and grounded on the possibilities of hypertextual representation. Readers/users are assumed participants and therefore the potential targets for these hypertexts are intended to refocus their mental background to help them reflect critically upon the implications that their/our own experiences and practices will have on the complexities of intercultural education when considered within the scope of citizenship education. Hence, the experience of reading literary texts in second language acquisition becomes a crucial element for providing the necessary socio-cultural background and developing the intercultural elements required by the European Space of Higher Education.

Acknowledgments

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