3 From new literacies to transmedia literacies: the New Approaches to Transmedia and Languages Pedagogy project

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Abstract

As students are becoming avid online media consumers and creators, participatory culture has shifted the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to one of community involvement (Chan & Herrero, 2010, p. 10). Taking into consideration the challenges and opportunities derived from the integration in formal settings (secondary and higher education) of different forms of participatory culture, this article presents the *New Approaches to Transmedia and Languages Pedagogy* project, developed by Manchester Metropolitan University, which has been motivated by the shift towards multimodal forms of communication and representation and the potential of new technologies to engage in more interactive and meaningful forms of learning and teaching. This research project seeks new avenues to supplement L2 teaching using film and video games as well as integrating transmedia and cross-media projects.

Keywords: cross-media, new media, transmedia, participatory culture, L2 learning and teaching.

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1.   Introduction

It is well known that higher education is in the midst of a transformative realignment related to funding and viable business models, developing knowledge, skills, and accreditation. The field of language studies is not immune to the dynamics of the convergent forces driving this metamorphosis. Due to the increasing linguistic, cultural and social diversity, cross-cultural and intercultural approaches permeate language educational policies. Moreover, the employability value of languages has been reiterated by the research findings of the British Academy's study Born Global (British Academy, 2016) and the Future of Work Report (Bakhshi, Downing, Osborne, & Schneider, 2017).

However, despite the evident merit of learning a second language, the diminishing popularity of languages in secondary schools and sixth-form colleges since the late 1990s and early 2000s has accentuated the drop in uptake of language degrees in UK. Yet this trend is not unique to British universities. A recent multi-authored feature in the Times Higher Education, with contributions from modern linguists from/in Australia, Denmark, the UK, and the US, looked at the new shape of the discipline. After weighing the challenges and priorities that can lead to recruiting more students for modern language courses at university level, these scholars offer a wide range of proposals ranging from growing a research-led discipline (Forsdick, 2017) to "communicating to the wider public the value of languages and cultural studies" (Verstraete-Hansen, 2017, n.p.).

Other contributors to the Times Higher Education feature point out the need to revise curricula content. Gramling (2017) proposes offering relevant courses "grounded in the lived complexity of societal multilingualism" (n.p.) and Kelly's (2017) article invites reflection on finding ways for providing an attractive and inspiring curriculum for current and future students who are more familiar with popular forms of culture (cinema, graphic novels, and videogames) than classic literature.

2. The New Approaches to Transmedia and Languages Pedagogy project

In the light of the above recommendations – particularly those calling for language learning tasks and projects that are not detached from real-life needs, interests, and preferences of the students – it is pertinent to note that traditional conventions of literacy have become "anachronistic" in the new communication environment (Kalantzis, Cope, Chan, & Dalley-Trim, 2015, p. 1). This article presents an on-going research project that addresses these issues in L2 teaching and learning. The Manchester Metropolitan University research project *New Approaches to Transmedia and Language Pedagogy* (http://transmediaineducation.com/) is developing a framework for the successful integration of suitable cultural media artefacts and cross-media and transmedia projects in the L2 classroom. This project aims at demonstrating the strategic importance of language-led research, and echoes the importance of multidisciplinary research in a multilingual world.

This project has two research lines. The first one focusses on teacher training and builds on relevant practice and research in the fields of film/visual and multimodal literacies applied to L2 learning and teaching carried out by the researchers through the Film in Language Teaching Association (FILTA[2]) and the research group Film, Languages, And Media in Education (FLAME[3]) at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2013[4]. This sub-project aims to evaluate current practices, curriculum requirements, and teacher training needs regarding the use of visual and media culture in language teaching in secondary schools and higher education in the UK. One of the most relevant conclusions from the literature review is that, moving beyond a monomodal and monolingual understanding of language learning and teaching, a growing body of scholarship is demonstrating the benefits of exploiting the interconnections between different modalities (aural, oral, and visual) in multilingual contexts

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2. www.filta.org.uk

3. https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/languages/flame/

4. The main characteristic of multimodal texts (e.g. films, video games, or websites) is that they combine written linguistic modes with other patterns of meaning (oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile, and/or spatial) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

(Chan & Herrero, 2010; Domínguez Romero, Bobkina, & Stefanova, 2018; Herrero, 2019; Herrero & Vanderschelden, 2019; Kern, 2003; Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy, 2016). As a part of the project, a series of surveys was conducted among secondary and higher education language teachers regarding the views of professional learning in the field of film and moving images applied to language learning and teaching and on the use of short films in L2. Based on the information gathered in the survey, the researchers created open resources centred on the development of intercultural competence, critical thinking/ writing and film analysis, which were piloted in different workshops and IN-SErvice Training days (INSETs). The study guides are available on the Transmedia in Education website.

Henry Jenkins (2006) uses the term *participatory culture* to explain the growth of user-generated content; *distributed cognition* and *collective intelligence*. This new ethos is permeating the development of new literacy strategies in education as demonstrated in Jenkins et al.'s (2009) white paper. Jenkins's (2006) study identifies a series of participatory practices, and new media skills in which youth are engaged nowadays: *play*, *performance*, *simulation*, *appropriation*, *multitasking*, *distributed cognition*, *collective intelligence*, *judgment*, *transmedia navigation*, *networking*, and *negotiation*. In an era of convergence, one of the most relevant skills for the world of education is *transmedia navigation*, defined as "the ability to deal with the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities" (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 46). The other line of the *New Approaches to Transmedia and Language Pedagogy* project focusses on how transmedia literacy moves forward the concept of new media literacies. An indication of the relevance of this interdisciplinary field is the European funded project *Transmedia Literacy*[5], which has focussed on the media activities that young people (12-18 years old) use in an informal environment and how they can serve to support formal learning in the classroom (Scolari, 2018). However, the review of literature in transmedia literacy in L2 learning and teaching reveals that there are very few studies, particularly in its application to HE. The Manchester Metropolitan sub-project centres on one of the applications of transmedia

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5. https://transmedialiteracy.org

storytelling in language education. The main goal of the *New Approaches to Transmedia and Language Pedagogy* project is

> "to bridge the gap between transmedia and L2 studies, both in secondary and higher education[6]. [It] has several interrelated objectives: 1. exploring the digital, media and visual skills of the Millennial and Generation Z and their cultures; 2. examining how transmedia projects can provide opportunities to supplement or complement traditional modes of L2 learning and teaching, and assessment; 3. testing new learning scenarios that allow for the development of innovative student-centred educational practices, and the implementation of collaborative strategies that ultimately meet the 21st century students' needs and future job skills and profiles [engaging students in critically reading and composing multimodal texts]" (Transmedia in education, n.p.[7]).

From an interdisciplinary perspective, introducing projects based on films and video-games allows students to engage critically and creatively with some of the most popular forms of media entertainment in the world and to explore a wide range of multimodal resources (animation, image, sound, music, text, etc.). Language learners can also reflect analytically on their work and their engagement with different transmedia concepts (narrative functions, prosumer, interaction, remix, narrativity, among others). The implementation of these projects and assessment of these skills can be done via wikis (in Moodle/ Blackboard platforms) and videos (via the university YouTube channel), both as objects of self-assessment and peer assessment[8]. The ultimate goal is to design a framework for introducing video games and transmedia practices in the language classroom based on research and practices. As a part of the project,

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6. Transmedia storytelling, that involves expressing messages and stories across the media spectrum (films and television series, social media, books, video games…) and making use of the affordances offered in each media channel, offers creative opportunities in four areas (Jenkins et al., 2009): backstory, mapping the world, displaying other character's perspectives on the action, and expanding audience engagement.

7. http://transmediaineducation.com/

8. An example of the implementation of these principles and activities can be seen in the The FaCE Project (Film and Creative Engagement) https://bit.ly/2RZSTeL.

researchers have created resources that have been piloted in an INSET. The resources are also available in the project website (for French and Spanish). These resources will be complemented with a teachers' toolkit that will be published in 2019. The final phase of this project comprises of a symposium and an international conference, which will take place in Manchester in April and June 2019.

3.   Conclusion

Under the impact of technology, the prevalence of media and visual forms of communication stresses the need for engaging students in critically reading and composing multimodal texts. Given the explosion of user-generated content online (Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and multimedia message services), it is quite apparent that language curricula should take into account the current prosumer (producer and consumer) profile and abilities of the young networked generation (under 30's).

Furthermore, over the past decade, the relevance of visual cultures has been growing. Different streaming services such as Apple, Amazon, HBO, Netflix, and particularly YouTube are shaping how we consume, interact, and communicate with media. The engagement with media in a multi-screen, multi-platform, multilingual networked digital environment is a trend particularly relevant to media and cultural studies, but also to the field of language studies as contemporary visual and transmedia culture is fundamentally transnational and *glocal*. Acknowledging all these trends, the *New Approaches to Transmedia and Language Pedagogy* project aims to exploit the opportunities and affordances in this media landscape. It offers teacher training and research-based strategies and activities suitable for supporting the development of transmedia literacy, which implies the ability to recognise, understand, and interact with complex, multimodal narratives. At the same time, it aims to foster the development of intercultural awareness and critical thinking and broaden other competences (e.g. translingual, transcultural, creativity, digital, and transmedia skills).

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