

Using Multimedia to Teach Arabic Literature

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Abstract

In the context of the Malaysian native Malay language speaker, learning Arabic literature, specifically poetry as a second or a foreign language, no specific research was found as well as in teaching Arabic poetry, i.e; classical to the Malaysian non-native speaker, ie:, via multimedia sources no specific research was found. However in the teaching of language context, numerous studies were found in the use of multimedia as well as non multimedia arenas. This is however not the scope of this study as it assumes that the target group has this type of elementary language base in order to progress to literature studies.

Poetry has been used in many forms in the teaching of Arabic language. It has been highlighted as being the link to fill the cultural void in teaching language. Learners thus experience the culture of the language and therefore relate to the language much more than just memorizing vocabulary, syntax and grammatical rules. Literature in general has also been discussed in the context of developing critical, analytical skills in the foreign learner of a language. .

It is however complex for second and foreign learners of that language. It therefore requires specific tools i.e. language tools geared to the literature context in order to facilitate the grasping of a literary work. The learning and teaching of literature also has its specific inherent problems which are not covered in that of linguistics teaching. A specific problem based theory which can discuss these issues to bridge the gap in literary understanding is a necessity. Thus in the teaching of literature it is optimum to have a preparatory phase, which provides linguistic activities and establishes comprehension, an interpretive phase, which includes expression and exchange of student reactions and a synthesis phase, which provides for an overall evaluation of the text. Hence, this study concentrates on formulating the tools necessary for these skills to be acquired, tailor made for the Malaysian student studying Arabic poetry, designed to increase their analytical ability in the Arabic language. The presentation of this in a multimedia package is to promote motivation and take the monotony out of the memorization text based context. This will also encourage independence and instill a level of confidence to take the challenge of Arabic literature.

Introduction

I begin my paper with a statement by Robert E. Probst (2004):

“We are trying to get kids to read good literature; to reflect on their responses to it; to discuss it with other readers; to sharpen their understanding of the texts, themselves and their classmates; to write, to reason, and to enjoy the emotional, social, aesthetic and intellectual pleasures of the literate life.”

The question that arises here when reflecting on the teaching and learning of Arabic literature, i.e; to non native speakers, is Robert E. Probst’s statement an impossible task? How do we begin to waddle through the present dichotomy, facing teachers of Arabic literature, i.e.; Arabic poetry. The challenge faced by teachers of Arabic literature at present, is how to motivate their students to take interest and love Arabic poetry. Arabic Poetry, i.e.; classical is considered by many as something so intangible, so superfluous, and so unreal. Others who have never taken the trouble to read much good poetry, have feared it as something “highbrow” or “an intricate puzzle games for sophisticated intellects”.

In our experience of teaching classical Arabic poetry, to Malaysian and non-native speakers of Arabic, we have found a lack in the methodology of teaching Arabic Poetry. This has brought about a fear of people in general, and students in particular, divilging themselves in Arabic literature generally and poetry specifically. As this is a fundamental component, both of literature as well as sound language aquisition, it has become a major handicap to the quality of product from Malaysia in general and The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) specifically. In our experience this issue seems to carry over to other Asean countries as well, especially those students who have not studied in an Arab country. It is therefore, a requirement to re-assess, re-evaluate, re-analyse and reformulate the methods employed as well as the texts used in empowering the students with these fundamental skills.

While current technological tools have countless applications in English and language arts classrooms, such as the broad array of free and fee-based online curriculum resources in the "Integrating Multimedia: A Cross-Curricular Concept" sidebar, such applications and approaches are yet to be introduced in the teaching and learning of Arabic literature. The current practice is still the traditional text-centered, memorization approach.

It is the aim of this paper to suggest that it is high time that the many methods and approaches, which have been successfully applied in the teaching and learning of English literature, such as those imagined by Vannevar Bush (1945), described by Ted Nelson (1974, 1987) and Judith Langer (1990), be introduced and applied in the teaching and learning of Arabic literature.

In addition students, who are non-native speakers of Arabic, as part of a comprehensive new method of teaching Arabic literature, should also be encouraged to try their hand at writing their own Arabic poetry. Thereafter posting drafts of this on a blog so that their classmates can offer constructive criticism online and on completion of a final draft, students can use podcasts to record themselves reading their original work of poetry while focusing on emphasizing their own

key words and then create a PowerPoint slide presentation with embedded multimedia and their poem's text to present results. It is in purporting these steps that this paper embarks.

Text-centered approach.

The most common approach to teaching Arabic literature equates literature education with reading instruction and adopts a traditional, text-centered approach.

In light of the above, Judith Langer's (1990) following discussion on the reading process, might be useful.

Judith Langer (1990) breaks literary understanding into four stances people take when engaged in the reading process -- "Being out and stepping it"; "Being in and moving through; "Stepping out and rethinking what one knows"; "Stepping back and objectifying the experience." Ideally, multimedia literature applications should support each of these stances. One way to summarize our review of those programs currently available and to suggest how multimedia might be employed to support response-based pedagogies in the future is to examine the features of multimedia, both currently employed and potentially available, with respect to each stance. This is done in the sections which follow.

- **Being Out and Stepping In**

In this stage, readers make initial contacts with the genre, content, structure, and language of the text by using their prior knowledge and its surface features to get sufficient information to being to build envisionment. With literature, readers try to make initial acquaintance with the characters, plot, and setting, as well as the interrelationships among these. They use information from the text in concert with their background knowledge to get enough information to "step in."

This first stage, then, involves readers being drawn into the text world, and it is where multimedia literature applications might come in handy. They invite access. Interactive graphics, sound, and video not only engage students in ways text alone cannot, but offer alternative, concrete representations of characters, plot, and setting that bring these in focus for students who might otherwise struggle to envision them. In addition, nonlinear links to background information concerning these and such literary elements as genre, structure, and language increase understanding and accessibility.

- **Being In and Moving Through**

In this stage, readers are immersed in the text world, using both text knowledge and background knowledge to develop meaning. They take new information and immediately use it to go beyond what they already understand, asking questions about motivation, causality, and implications. This stance, then, involves immersion in the text world, hence, it is an arena where a printed text is probably superior to multimedia. Here, multimedia

programs might best serve functions similar to reading journals; that is, students might read from a printed text but write comments and questions in a multimedia program as they occur to them. The use of multimedia applications would then have an advantage over written reading journals to the extent that they encouraged the linking of comments and questions to the text, and to the extent that they promoted reflective public discourse around such links. Indeed, current research concerning such experimental environments as "Intermedia" (Landow, 1992) and "Story Space" (Bolter, 1991) suggest features which provide linked commenting capabilities can have a positive effect on literature teaching and learning.

- Being In and Stepping Out

In this stage, readers use their text knowledge to reflect on personal knowledge. They use what they read in text to reflect on their own lives, on the lives of others, or on the human condition. Whereas the previous stance was primarily concerned with shared text knowledge and discourse around it, this stance is primarily concerned with private knowledge and personal reflections. Ideally, multimedia literature applications should provide two sorts of spaces – public "discourse" spaces where students can question and comment on the text as well as reflect on others' observations; and private "journal" spaces where they can reflect on their own experiences and understanding without worrying about others' opinions of these.

- Stepping Back and Objectifying the Experience

In this stage, readers distance themselves from the text world, reflecting on and reacting to both the content and the experience. They objectify the text, judge it, and relate it to other texts or experiences. This evaluation and generalization is based on their notions of specific genres as well as the content they learned or the literary experiences they engaged in. This stance is one in which readers relate a text to other texts and other experiences. Here, then, the ideal functions for multimedia to provide would be linking mechanisms similar to those imagined by Vannevar Bush (1945) and described by Ted Nelson (1974, 1987) when he coined the term hypermedia -- links that readers could create between what they are reading and other literary texts and other media such as films, links that could be annotated with text and graphics, perhaps even sound and video.

Response-based approaches.

Response-based approaches to teaching and learning literature (Bleich, 1978; Holland, 1975; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1991; Tompkins, 1980) provide alternatives to objectifying literature. Where traditional approaches champion close readings of texts and "correct" interpretations, response-based theorists regard readers as active meaning-makers whose personal experiences affect their interpretations of literary works. Response pedagogies encourage the exploration of multiple perspectives and the construction of defensible interpretations of literary works. Response pedagogies encourage the exploration of multiple perspectives and the construction of defensible interpretations and make the quality of students' critical and creative thinking the focus of assessment. They place student-generated questions at the center of learning, encouraging a

"problem-finding" as well as problem-solving approach to critical thinking. They emphasize the importance of teaching and learning the processes of literary understanding, which are viewed as both socially and personally mediated.

Although response-based theories are generally accepted by scholars in both English and Arabic departments and schools of education alike, response-based pedagogies have yet to become common practice.

One impediment to the widespread adoption of response-based practice is the traditional structure of the classroom itself. That structure -- in particular, its linearity, its hierarchical lines of authority, and its emphasis on scientific reasoning, on individualism, and on canon -- is rooted in the evolution of print as the dominant medium of communication (Eisenstein, 1979; McLuhan, 1963; Purves, 1990). It seems possible, then, that the classroom use of media other than printed texts might result in environments more supportive of response-based teaching and learning. One promising potential alternative is multimedia.

Integrating Multimedia

Multimedia combine a variety of media -- text, graphics, still photographs, animations, sound, and video -- in a nonlinear computer-based environment with which users can interact. There are several reasons to believe multimedia might provide a promising alternative to text (Karen Swan & Carla Meskill, 1997):

1. Multimedia support independent learning through student control of information and events (Milheim, 1988) and can thus promote student-centered learning. Indeed, teaching and learning in computer-based classrooms has been shown to be more student-centered than teaching and learning in traditional text-based classrooms (Swan & Mitriani, 1991).
2. Multimedia technologies have proved a powerful catalyst for cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Webb, 1983). As such, it can enhance socially mediated learning processes.
3. Multimedia support constructionist (Papert, 1993) views of learning which hold that learning takes place when students actively and collectively build knowledge structures. Computer-based representations can make this process explicit, thus increasing the likelihood that students will internalize what they learn (Salomon, 1988; Scardamelia & Bereiter, 1991).
4. Multimedia support multiple representations of knowledge and nonlinear domain analyses (Spiro & Jehng, 1990), and can make accessible the extensive amount of information from which multiple meaning and interpretations evolve (Duffy & Knuth, 1992).
5. The visual and aural elements of multimedia support diverse learning styles (Spoehr, 1992). These same elements make multimedia a rich and engaging learning environment, contributing to high levels of motivation and involvement (Chomsky, 1990).

6. Finally, multimedia create an opportunity for teachers to recast their own understanding of the role of text in the teaching and learning of literature, and, accordingly, their own beliefs about -- and roles in -- teaching and learning.

Evaluating the effectiveness of multimedia applications.

In evaluating the effectiveness of a certain multimedia application in enhancing response-based approaches to literature teaching and learning in regular classroom settings, the following features should be given priority:

1. **Good multimedia.** High-quality sound, computer animations, and video were deemed highly motivating and capable of enhancing the literary aspects of a work. Evaluators also thought that good multimedia might prompt comparisons between print and other media, and between students' own and others' interpretations of a work that might lead to deeper understandings. At the same time, evaluators agreed that extrinsic and too extensive use of multimedia might detract from students literary experiences. They thus thought that a balance between the multimedia and the literary aspects of a program should be striven for.
2. **A high degree of interactivity.** Evaluators thought that programs more responsive to user input were clearly more supportive of a pedagogy grounded in student responses. Features which allowed students to input their own thought and reactions to literary works were deemed most useful in this regard, although most evaluators thought interactivity of any sort more engaging than not.
3. **Extensive supplementary materials.** Both on- and off-line supplementary materials were deemed supportive of response-based teaching and learning. On-line support materials containing background information and open-ended questions for discussion were though particularly useful, as were the activity suggestions found in some teacher guides that encouraged the linking of themes developed in a literary work to students' own experiences.

To further ensure the effectiveness of multimedia applications in the literature teaching and learning programs, two implementation-specific factors are reviewed as useful:

1. **Teacher direction and guidance.** Teachers needed to develop questions, methodologies, tasks, and opportunities for discourse that would lead students to response to these programs in ways that supported the development of literary understanding.
2. **Student groupings.** The importance of student groupings for program usage is directly related to the notion of discourse opportunities. At the high school level, evaluators felt that the most effective use of such programs would be project-oriented activities assigned

to small groups. It is interesting to note that, at all levels, evaluators agreed that in order to foster discourse, the programs we reviewed should be used with at least one other student, preferably in small groups.

Conclusion

Multimedia technology, which has been applied in the teaching and learning of English literature, holds promise as a tool for the teaching and learning of Arabic literature. This paper has proposed a few novel, step by step, ways of using multimedia in the teaching and appreciating of Arabic literature. The challenge however, lies in ensuring that the multimedia applications assist in developing literary understanding and appreciation for Arabic literature and not merely support the development of reading skills and offer interpretations of literature. Another challenge is to ensure that students and teachers alike do not get caught up with finding the latest and greatest technology to use that they lose sight of their primary goal. The challenge with technology as stated by Rober E. Probst (2004) “is to keep it a means and not let it become an end.”

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