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A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN EDUCATION: THE USE OF INTERNET AND LITERATURE

Raúl Montero Gilete & Martin Simonson

Imagine that your students can not stop speaking about your subject. Imagine that they are almost obsessed with the idea of being in class working on your lessons. Imagine that you can give them the opportunity of developing their language and personal skills while teaching them.

This is what we thought some years ago when we started thinking about a new and revolutionary method to learn English while our students read literature and use new technologies. After the unquestionable success of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *Harry Potter*, we observed our children and realized that most of them loved Fantasy Literature, so we began to develop an idea based on this concept and the Scarecrow Project started.

The Scarecrow Project is made up of an original novel; a Book of Adventure; and a personal password that provides access to the project's website with a wide range of auxiliary resources. It is designed to provide the teacher with suggestions for activities related to the project¹, as well as the necessary tools to fully exploit its vast range of possibilities in their teaching and evaluation. The main aims of this project are to develop the students' reading skills, stimulate the students to take on an active interest in reading and in literature and, help students become conscious of the learning process related to the acquisition of reading and speaking skills. There are also some other activities integrated in the Project such as an active use of TIC's in the classroom, in well-defined contexts (WebQuests and online resources for the Book of Adventure), exercises to prepare the students for official language exams (focus on Trinity), original

¹ Learning too often takes place in separate compartments or silos for each school subject. Cross-curricular themes and projects create bridges between the various subjects taught. In school, we work to help students to gain the knowledge and skills they need for success in the real world. The real world is usually not safely compartmentalized. In our daily lives, we often need to apply skills from several subject areas simultaneously. Cross-curricular themes and projects better reflect the reality of daily life. See Mehisto, P., Marsh, D. & Frigols M.J. *Uncovering CLIL. Content and Language Integrated Learning in Bilingual and Multilingual Education*. England: Macmillan Published Limited, 2008.

materials for evaluation of language skills in the classroom and, contests (drawings and essays, with attractive prizes).

The project is very versatile and it can be used with different age groups and in different languages. It also can be used as an extramural activity to reinforce the acquisition of contents and skills². It is especially useful in bilingual and trilingual educational centres that use different languages for different subject areas, but it can also be used fruitfully in monolingual educational contexts³. If we check its applicability, we realize that all the language skills are covered. *Reading skills* are worked with the novel, the Book of Adventure, the online resources (WebQuest, resources for the Book of Adventure and, exercises for preparation of official language exams). We cover the *writing skills* with the exercises students can do when they use the WebQuest or participate in the writing contest. *Speaking skills* are really important in this project and are thought to prepare official language exams (Trinity)⁴. We do not forget the *listening skills* and use several exercises and songs.

We sometimes may think that Literature and Language has nothing to do with the *new technologies*, but the Scarecrow Project integrates them with the use of online resources

² Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is gaining momentum in all levels of education across Europe. Due to the expansion of CLIL in different context, the importance for all stakeholders to communicate, collaborate and work together becomes increasingly important. As an innovative movement it is dynamic and rapidly being adopted and adapted in primary, secondary and tertiary learning institutions. Whilst it could be argued that CLIL in very different forms has been in existence for many years, one of the more recent and significant changes is that a research agenda firmly embedded in effective classroom practices is bringing together a widening range of those involved in education. (...) In turn, different aspects of research and inquiry are raising issues for further investigation which promote CLIL as a pedagogic concept which unites theory and practice. See Coyle, Do. "Foreword" in *CLIL across Educational Levels*, Spain: Santillana Educación & Richmond Publishing, 2009.

³ Spain is a mixture of heterogeneous language situations that lead to different ways of understanding and managing L2 education. Its territorial organization is based on a system of autonomous communities. Apart from Spanish, some of these communities own another official language. This peculiarity gives way to language contact situations that enable a culture of bilingualism non-existent in the rest of the communities where Spanish is the only official language. See Fernández Fontecha, A. "Spanish CLIL: Research and Official Actions" in Ruiz de Zarobe, Y. & Jiménez Catalán, R. M. *Content and Language Integrated Learning*. England: Multilingual Matters, 2009.

Current research on the acquisition of English as a third language (L3) in institutional settings has shown that an earlier start does not produce significantly better results in a situation of instructed foreign language acquisition, that is, the earlier is not the better (...) Studies focusing on content-based instruction (CLIL) have concluded that this type of acquisition results in improved proficiency in English language skills and appears to ease students' transition into the academic mainstream. See Martínez Adrián, M. & Gutiérrez Mangado, J. "The Acquisition of English Syntax by CLIL Learners in the Basque Country" in Ruiz de Zarobe, Y. & Jiménez Catalán, R. M. *Content and Language Integrated Learning*. England: Multilingual Matters, 2009.

⁴ There are three main reasons for getting students to speak in the classroom. Firstly, speaking activities provide rehearsal opportunities – chances to practise real-life speaking in the safety of the classroom. Secondly, speaking tasks in which students try to use any or all of the language they know to provide feedback for both teacher and students. Everyone can see how well they are doing: both how successful they are, and also what language problems they are experiencing. And finally, the more students have opportunities to *activate* the various elements of language they have stored in their brains, the more automatic their use of these elements become. As a result, students gradually become autonomous language users. This means that they will be able to use words and phrases fluently without very much conscious thought. See Harmer, Jeremy. *How to teach English*, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2007, p. 123.

for the Book of Adventure, WebQuest, exercises for preparation of official language exams and, essay and drawing contests. We have been teaching different English levels, in several context and ages. For this reason, we know how difficult is sometimes to motivate students or teach a lesson. That was one of our premises; we wanted to create a material capable of being attractive for students and easy for teachers, where the educator can follow a well defined methodology without spending hours in understanding it. Each of the novels that integrate the Scarecrow Project is an original, unabridged text. In other words, it is what a student might find in a bookshop, in the section of literature. The design of the book also reinforces its authenticity. It is not created as yet another resource for the classroom; it is a novel which is on sale all over the world, discussed in forums, reviewed in literary magazines and read for pleasure by many different readers in different contexts. For this reason, the students take part in the authentic “life” of the novel, independently of its use in the classroom, and may get information about it from a wide range of sources. As many students tend to develop negative attitudes towards material specifically designed for use in the classroom, this new experience will increase their initial interest in the book, even before they open it. Also, it will give them an opportunity to work with original material in a different language than their own, and so prepare them for what they will find in real contexts, in the real world, outside school. This is the main reason why the text is not adapted to the classroom.

The accompanying Book of Adventure, on the other hand, is a game that provides a summary of the text in a language adapted to the level of the students. It is a radically new and entertaining way of making the students aware of their reading comprehension, and it is meant to be used as a complement to the novel, in order to enhance the reading experience in general, and to develop reading skills related to the comprehension of an unabridged original novel, develop skills to read, summarise and respond correctly to instructions, integrate the use of new technologies, such as Internet, in the process of working with literature, stimulate an interest in the students for delving deeper into the analysis of characters, setting, and plot, by exposing them to an entertaining story, by creating a sense of fast progress, and by attractive visual support in the book and on the resources of the website, inspire students to establish an active dialogue with the texts and with the additional resources found on the website – to work with literature in context, help the students carry out a continuous self-evaluation of the progress they are

making in their reading skills and, finally, make them relate positively to literature, novels, and books in general.

The *novel* provides the student with an original text, written in an engaging style, with a highly entertaining plot and easily recognisable characters. It is made up of twenty clearly defined chapters, each with a distinctive focus. On the other hand, the *Book of Adventure* is designed so that *all* students can work with it easily, and intuitively evaluate their own efforts. The language is adapted to the target level. In the first book presented to the project, *Golgrim's Keys*, the book is divided into a hundred and sixty short paragraphs that are numbered. In each paragraph, the text informs the student of the current situation and then posits several choices. In order to make progress in the reading, the students follow the directions given to them by the book itself, make their choices and move back and forth in the text. The plot follows the general structure of the novel, so the students will be familiar with characters, settings, and plot before reading. The reasons for this disposition are various. First, students will already be familiar with characters, settings, and plot. Hence, they are not being given a lot of new information, so they can focus more effectively on their task. Second, by dividing the book into clearly defined, short paragraphs, the students will get sense of fast progress, which adds additional confidence in their reading. And finally, the structure of reading - jumping from one paragraph to another - does not create a formal gap between fast readers and slow readers. A fast reader may be far advanced in the *Adventure* but nonetheless find himself being directed to a paragraph on the third page, while a slow reader may find himself reading on page 50 in just a few minutes' time. The reading experience is not lineal, as in the novel, but centred on the qualitative aspects.

The way of using the on-line resources is very easy both for teachers and students. They access the resources of the project by introducing their personal password on the Projects's website. The resources are specifically designed to work with the novel, and may be used on an individual or collective level. The WebQuest related to the novel will provide the students with an introduction to the genre of fantasy literature, and suggest plenty of further reading and online resources for further investigation. Furthermore, the WebQuest will encourage them to delve deeper into certain literary aspects of the novel, such as a formal analysis of characters, plot and style. During the first part of the

WebQuest, the students gather all the information they need to be able to write a short paper on concrete aspects of the novel (of the teacher's choice), following specific formal instructions (what in the academic world is called a "Style Sheet". For extra motivation, this paper may be submitted electronically to the publishing house and take part in the writing contest. The best papers will be rewarded a prize in the shape of a sum of money and a diploma, and by having their papers published on the website dedicated to the novels (the official website for the novels, that any person may access). Moreover, in the web resources section, the students who are working with *Golgrim's Keys* find an interactive map over the imaginary world in which the novel takes place. The different areas are related to different sections in the novel, and their corresponding sections in the Book of Adventure that we include in the teachers' guide. By clicking on any of the specific areas of the map, the students will find information and pictures featuring places, characters and events related to the particular area. This resource is particularly useful when working with the *Book of Adventure*, because it also provides recommendations, warnings and hints for opportunities, as well as references to the pages in the novel that the student may want to read more thoroughly in order to overcome the difficulties in the area and make progress in the game.

Every teacher has his/her own way of teaching⁵, and we know that most of us would be able to develop amazing techniques to use the project in class, but we know how busy teachers are, living in a society that hardly allows us to stop, think and prepare attractive lessons. The Scarecrow project allows us to work its contents in several ways. The *novel* may be read aloud in the classroom by the teacher, while the students follow in

⁵ Teachers are all performers in the classroom at some level, what does this mean for a teacher who wants to promote learner autonomy? Can we "perform" and still act as a resource? What kind of performance should we adopt when giving feedback? Does "performance" automatically mean that we must be standing at the front of the class putting on a show? For clearly if this was the case, teacher performance would describe only one kind of teacher role and might be criticised for the very transmissive and teacher-centred behaviour it demonstrated. But different teachers perform differently. See Harmer, Jeremy. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2007, p. 112.

their own copies; by the students themselves taking turns at reading aloud while the rest follow, or individually in silence. The *Book of Adventure* should ideally be used after the students have read the original text that the Adventure is based on, because the novel will provide them with the necessary clues to make the correct judgments along the way and help them feel that they are making progress in the reading. There should always be an introductory session in which the teacher goes through the rules with the students, and then gets them started. The Book of Adventure can then be used individually, to enhance reading comprehension, or collectively, to enhance both reading comprehension and oral production skills, by having different students reading different paragraphs, in which case the correct choice is discussed and debated by the class, with references to the novel, and then tested and evaluated with reference to the result. The latter approach will involve the whole class simultaneously and guarantee a uniform progress, while the first approach is better suited for purposes of self-evaluation. The Book of Adventure can also be used parallel to the reading of the novel. For instance, the teacher may ask the students to read the first three chapters of the novel for a given day. Then, in class, the teacher can introduce the rules of the Book of Adventure and get the students started, telling them to work their way through the adventure until they reach the paragraph number which corresponds to the end of chapter three in the novel (see the complete chapter - paragraph correspondence below). If the students have access to computers in their classroom, they may use the resources on the website to obtain recommendations and hints. The teacher should stress the fact that there is no point in cheating, because the students are making personal evaluations of themselves, and the most important thing is to make *progress* – both in terms of adding points and in terms of reading on in the book.

The Scarecrow Project allows even the most limited students to experience a sense of progress, although they have not read the original novel, because of the structure in numbered paragraphs, which will stimulate them to continue reading. More advanced students will challenge themselves to obtain as many points as possible and to move up on the scale in the book's *Hall of Fame* until they finish with the highest possible score⁶. The students may of course also work with the novel and the Book of Adventure

⁶ Educational Uses of Role-Playing Games

on their own, in their free time or as part of the assigned homework, though there should always be at least two formal sessions in class dedicated to the experience, in order to get them started and then to discuss the progress that they are making and give them further hints. If the teacher should prefer to use the Book of Adventure in this way, it is recommended to coordinate this discussion session (or sessions) with the other activities found among the resources on the website, such as the WebQuest dedicated to literature and writing, based on the reading of *Golgrim's Keys*, or the preparatory exercises for the official language exams (which are also based on the novel). It may also be coordinated with activities related to the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which stresses self-evaluation as one of its key features.

To conclude, we can state that the Scarecrow project covers many different levels of language competence. It is based on an integrated use of the Internet and literature to

This is a collection of articles which relate to the use of RPGs in an educational context. In many ways, role-playing games are a natural fit to education. A number of role-playing supplements (particularly several in the GURPS series) seriously treat topics in history and science, which have passionate players. However, this aspect of games has been relatively neglected. Below I have collected a number of links related to education and RPGs.

RPG Realism & Education (Added July 1, 2003)

This is an essay I wrote on the topic of realism in RPG design, and how it relates to education.

Educational Roleplaying (Added May 8, 2008)

A discussion site devoted to use of role-playing in education, with links to a variety of resources.

GAMA's "Games & Education"

A series of brochures from GAMA (a non-profit international trade association of companies which produce games).

David Millian's "Gaming and Education" Newsletters

This was a series of newsletters edited by David Millians (an elementary school teacher in Georgia) which has 13 issues online, from 1993 to 1998.

The Roleplay Workshop

A "educational enrichment program in Oakland for children ages 10 to 18, using role-playing in a custom system and setting.

The Way

A series of three role-playing games which were developed within the Lutheran church in Sweden, which were intended for use in confirmation courses.

Reflections on Gaming With the Younger Generation

An essay by a high school math teacher, Mike Petty, who used various games in an educational context.

RPGs in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom

An essay by Brian David Phillips (Department of English, National Chengchi University). Brian has a number of other RPG, gaming, and education essays on his site as well:

Communications: EFL RPG

Language Learning Benefits of Role Playing Games

Methodology for Using RPGs in English Conversation Classes

Card Based Games in the Classroom

The Game Design Project: Student-Generated Flash Games in the Classroom

Use of Role-Play Simulations in Teaching

Problem Based Learning: within a traditional teaching environment

PhD Education: where left and right brains meet?

Academic Gaming Review

A small quarterly journal edited by Peter L. de Rosa which covers freeware educational simulations, articles on using classroom games, course materials, and website and game reviews.

See Kim. John. H. in <http://www.darksfire.net/jhkim/rpg/whatis/education.html>, Thu Jan 21 20:15:32 2010

acquire communicative skills, and it can be easily adapted to the shifting needs of the classroom in Primary, Secondary and University education. It also features original music and artwork, and a great amount of exercises for evaluation in different subject areas, and for the preparation of official language exams. We know that to be a teacher is difficult, but to be an educator is even more difficult. The Scarecrow Project is not just another way of presenting language lessons; it tries to refresh old methodologies mixing both language skills and skills for life.

APPENDIX

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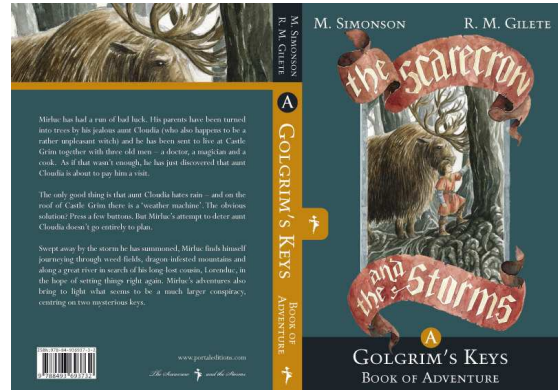
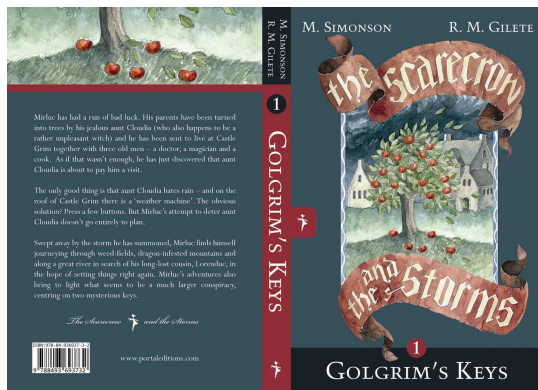
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RELATED ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover and back cover of *Golgrim's Keys* and the *Book of Adventure*:



Some illustrations of the project:

