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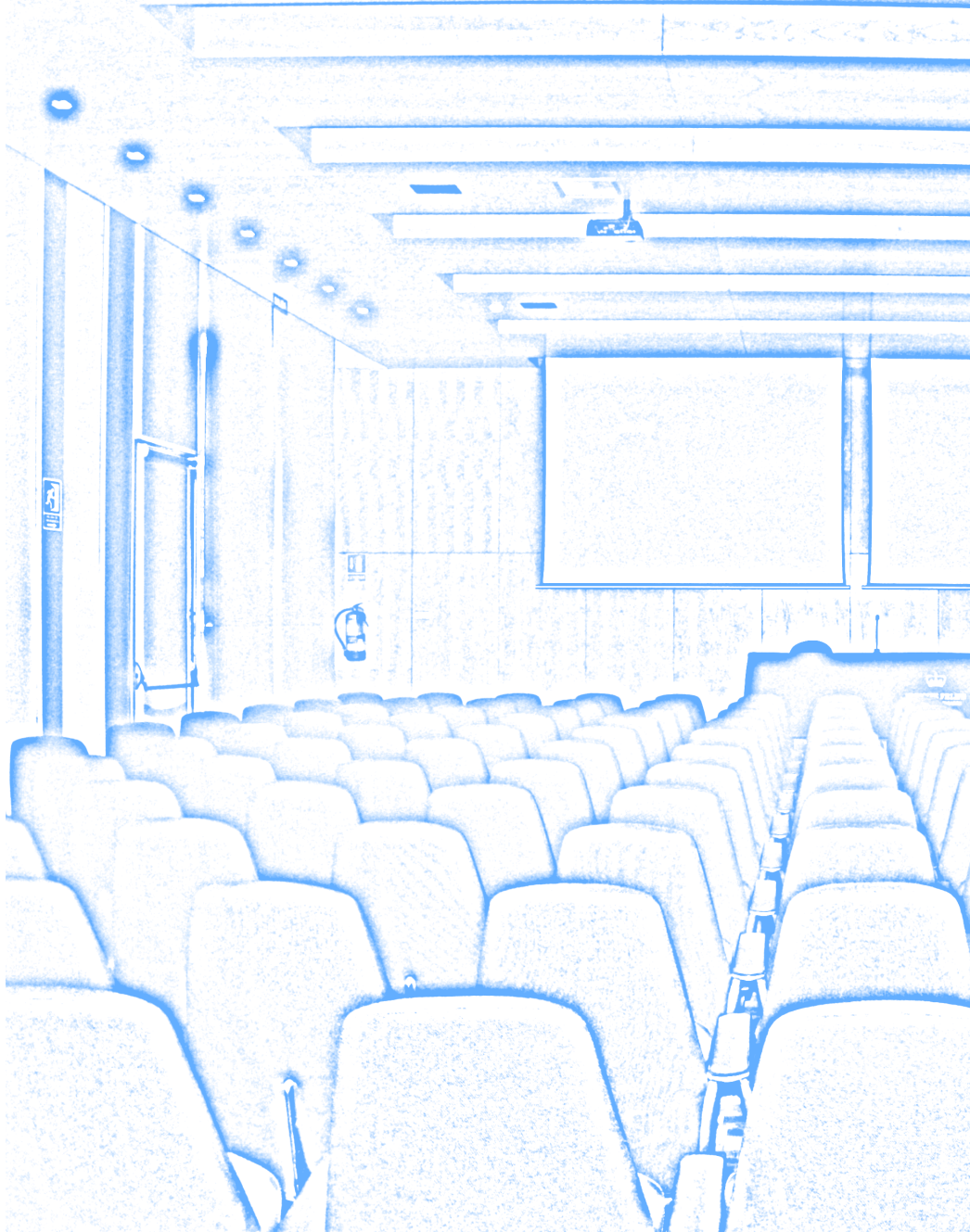
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Teaching English through literature can be fun. Why not?

ISABEL LUQUE PÉREZ

Resumen

La introducción de elementos literarios en la enseñanza del inglés en Secundaria es escasa porque no es un elemento del currículo per se en las asignaturas de lenguas extranjeras. Este está puramente orientado en los enfoques comunicativos y en la implantación y práctica de las funciones del lenguaje, olvidando que una clase puede hacerse comunicativa a través de la literatura. ¿Cómo? Este artículo expone algunos recursos dentro de la gran pluralidad de actividades – desde la ludificación más tradicional hasta la más tecnológica — aplicables que sirven para la creación de puentes entre la realidad del alumno y la ficción del texto literario, que esgrimen las destrezas integradas y, además, que fomenta el hábito lector entre nuestros estudiantes.

Palabras clave

Literatura, ludificación, enfoques comunicativos, destrezas integradas.

Abstract

The introduction of literary elements in English teaching in Compulsory and Non-Compulsory Secondary Education is scarce since it is not a curricular element per se in the subjects of foreign languages. The curriculum development is purely focused on communicative approaches by means of implementing and practicing language functions, forgetting that a class can perfectly be communicative through literature. How? This article presents some resources within the wide plurality of activities – from the most traditional gamification to the more technological one – since aim at creating bridges between reality and fiction, interweaving integrated skills and fostering the reading habit among our students as well.

Key words

Literature, gamification, communicative approaches, integrated skills.

1. Introduction

As Mark Van Doren wisely pointed out "The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery". Perhaps one of the turning points in teaching methodology was to lead the students towards discovery and viceversa, what entails that traditional and doddering approaches are put aside in an ambitious attempt to rescue the essence of learning.

Certainly, the emergence of English and its status as *lingua franca* has challenged the learning focus, leading it to constantly question what communication is and how we make our students communicative. That is of momentous importance since its adequate implementation is permanently being called into question within our educational system.

In the same vein, it seems salutary to wonder how teachers can achieve communication successfully and in what way. No doubt we should keep an eclectic point of view about these aspects when teaching a foreign language since every day is surprisingly different and unexpected and this is the reason why this article aims at emphasizing and highlighting the mixture of communication, technology and literature.

2. Learning English through literature: why?

It seems convenient to start by defining what authentic materials are. As Harmer puts it authentic material are "those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students but for the speakers of the language in question "(1991:185). What this definition is implying is that literature itself is encompassed within it and, as we shall see later in Section 3, it is perfectly feasible to include non-graded readers in our lessons. Perhaps it is obvious to state that when a teacher opts to teach a particular aspect, s/he will wonder about the assets and results and, undeniable, this process will be based on trial and error. Therefore, this section is intended to shed some light on the reasons why learning English through literature can be stimulating, engrossing, addictive, entertaining and, above all, exciting for our students, who are one of the most essential source and resource of our lessons.

There are many authors who pinpoint the advantageous use of literary texts such as Duff and Maley or Parkinson and Thomas; thence, the following list endeavors to provide the reader with seven reasons why implementing literature can be beneficial.

1. It contributes positively to develop linguistic competence in the sense that it is one of the most natural exposure students can be fronted with. Besides, students are given words in context and it fosters reading comprehension.

2. It also instills sociocultural competence and encourages cultural awareness and expression – one of the key competences – among our students with a diverse range of aspects to be covered (e.g.: traditions, landscapes of a particular country or city, traditional folktales, etc.).

3. There is a video on YouTube called "Do school kill creativity?" by Sir Ken Robinson. The question should be answered emphatically as a no and literature, without the shadow of a doubt, fosters critical thinking and, inevitable, shuttles the reader to a parallel universe brimmed of self-constructed pictures.

4. It promotes cooperative learning when carrying out activities, that is, positive interdependence and interaction which, at the same time, stimulates and makes them talk.

5. It is not as time-consuming as you might think.

6. Literature can be approached from a multidisciplinary point of view. No matter what the topic is, you will probably find it in an excerpt.

7. Perhaps, one of the most indispensable, if not the most, reason is because it is merely fun.

Once these reasons have been taken into consideration, overcoming prejudices about literature seems closer to be achieved because literature cannot and must not be implemented in isolation. There is another key aspect in our current teaching: technology. Let us not forget that our students are digital natives.

Consequently, theory will be nothing if practice is not supplied along it. In the next section, a whole set of activities will be provided as to enlighten and facilitate how the implementation of literature is within everyone's reach.

3. Tasks, activities, project-based learning: invigorating our lessons.

Due to the fact that this section could be a never-ending part, it will be focused on four tasks, activities or project-based learning that use literature as a basis for their development in the class. Naturally, these activities must be graded according to the English level of the students or the number of students in the class, among other factors that are borne in mind when designing any activity.
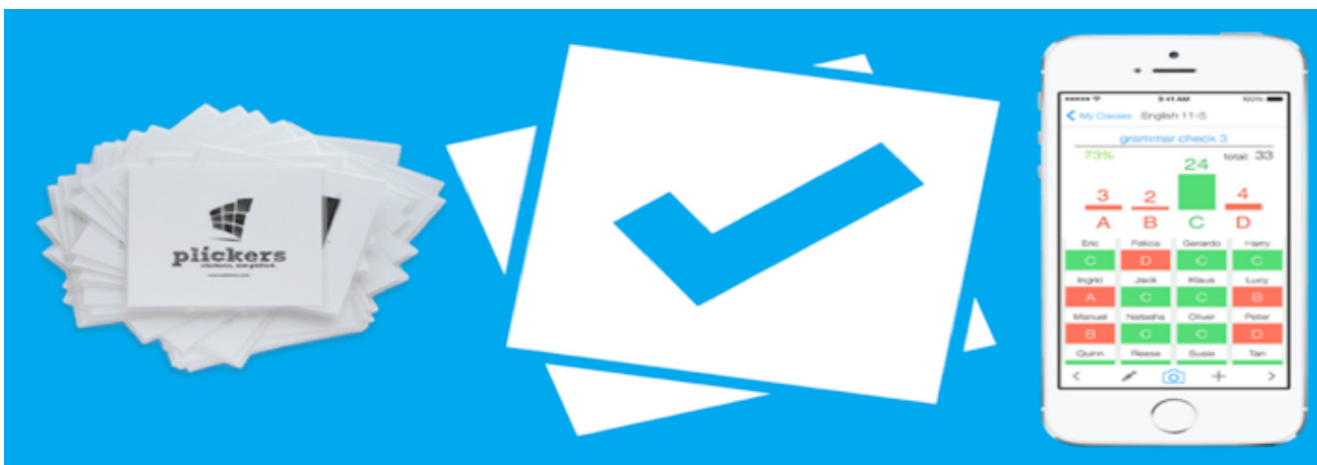
3.1. Kahoot

As two of its logo claim, Kahoot is a technological device that "makes learning awesome" and "brings joy to learning". Kahoot is useful when creating tests, discussions or surveys.

First, what is it? It is a digital platform where the teacher creates specific questions that are answered by the students by using their own device. It is true that mobiles phones are not allowed in high-schools but this app is perfectly fine if you have a language lab at your disposal or students do have laptops. It is engaging for students since it is a new way to be engaged and motivated and, above all, it awakes its competitive instinct since there is a final score.

Then, how can we possibly apply it in our lessons? Simply by adding questions and giving online access to learners. Undoubtedly, there are many ways to exploit this source since we can create tests or discussions. Thus, one way to test if students haven't understood the excerpt is, for instance, by creating a multiple choice test in which the specific content we wish is emphasized, that is, from comprehension questions to grammar ones and discussions where the communicative competence is fostered.

3.2. Plickers

Very similar to the previous one but it has an extremely recommendable asset: students do not need any device. It is just us who manage our mobile phones in order to scan their answers. They are assigned a number and are given a card. Once this has been done and their number and name are within our data, it is time to play.

We either can create multiple choice questions or just true or false one but, for us, it is much safer than Kahoot and, of course, easier to implement at any moment.

3.3. Let's work on comics!

Mixing tradition and technology has been already stressed so why not again? We can use comics and it is a very nice way to use a very visual-friendly element for our younger students. As Josh Elder summed up (2004, http://teach.com/comics-in-the-classroom/why-comics , last accessed 10/04/2016), there are "three E's of Comics", being "engagement", "efficiency" and "effectiveness", proving necessary enough as to set it out in class.

There are endless ways to use comics on class, specially using the Internet, but we will not be creating our own comic in this occasion –although it is a possibility as well -, we will be reading a literary excerpt so the students can remodel it and make dialogues out of it in a comic. Nothing new so far but extremely useful when it comes to cover reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

3.4. Project-based learning: creating PLE of several authors.

New websites are being launched in order to complete our digital needs. It is irrefutable we are quite more demanding with resources than we were before. As defined by Blumenfeld, P. et al (1991:371)

An integrative perspective on motivation and learning has led to new interest in student projects. Project-based learning is a comprehensive perspective focused on teaching by engaging students in investigation. Within this framework, students pursue solutions to nontrivial problems by asking and refining questions, debating ideas, making predictions, designing plans and/or experiments, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, communicating their ideas and findings to others […]

One of the many ideas that could be carried out is the creation of an author's (writer, literary character, etc…) personal learning environment, that is, the goal and purpose is to make the learner investigate about the author's life (or character, as said) and create an account on a social network in which the learner publishes as if he were the author himself as well as an oral presentation using Genial.ly.

Of course, many more ideas could be added, although they require a much longer preparation along the academic course such as creating some podcasts, acting out as if they were *videobloggers*, and so on and so forth.

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, we might say that there are many literary excerpts and books that can be exploited. They just need to be chosen properly and be implemented in the same way so that students can realize there is a world full of life beyond their realities. Truly, tradition and modernity can walk hand in hand along the road to successful English learning.

 Undeniable, technology has become an indisputable part of our teaching practice. However, it should not be forgotten that literacy is also an indispensable part of our life so mixing both of them gives birth to an attractive way to teach English through literature. Highlighting meaningful and captivating activities can possibly make the learner be eager to learn a L2 when achieving a feeling of fulfillment and fun in the class; and the teacher since we are using an invaluable cultural resource for our students to learn.

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