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Learning to Learn in a Digital Context: Language Learning Webtasks for an Autonomising “Wreading” Competence¹

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Abstract. In this paper we aim to analyse how language learning tasks can help students develop an autonomising wreading competence, i.e. a competence involving the ability to read online texts and to construct one’s own text by traversing sites. This competence involves different types of skills: technical skills of information elaboration and management, linguistic and semiotic skills, cognitive skills, and metacognitive skills. We consider, therefore, that the development of the wreading competence calls for a new approach to language learning, based on the joint development of autonomous learning and new literacies. Although new technologies provide quality resources and tools for teachers to design pedagogical environments which meet the principles of learner autonomy, ICT does not foster by itself autonomous learning (Villanueva, 2006). The promotion of learner autonomy requires carefully designed learning tasks aiming at a long-life learning process. The purpose of this paper is to put forward criteria for the design of language learning cybertasks that promote the development of new literacies applied to language learning autonomy.

1. Introduction

Learning technologies can provide support for constructivist pedagogical practices, which encourage learners to construct their knowledge on the basis of their individual experiences, cognitive structures and social identity. The usefulness of ICT for constructivist pedagogies is evident in its potential for the enhancement of autonomous learning, one of the basis of such pedagogies. ICT can help design pedagogical environments which meet the principles of autonomous learning, e.g., learner responsibility and control over the learning process, support to help the learner develop cognitive and metacognitive strategies, respect for learners’ differences. However, ICT does not generate by itself autonomous learning (Villanueva 2006; Ruiz Madrid, in press). In order to help students harness the potential of ICT for the development of an autonomising competence, it is necessary to carefully design learning environments or learning tasks that promote the active use of metacognitive strategies, that is, that prompt students to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning.

In this paper we are concerned with the design of language learning webtasks which help students develop an autonomising “wreading” competence, where the ability to read online texts and construct one’s own texts meet. We define “wreading competence” as the ability to understand the pragmatic, discursive and semiotic features of online texts, harness their affordances and interact with them in various ways, find relevant information in different semiotic modes within and across these texts, and relate and meaningfully use such information in order to achieve a specific purpose, complete a task or produce an output. The “wreading competence” involves, therefore, i) technical skills of information elaboration and management; ii) linguistic and semiotic skills; iii) cognitive skills, and iv) metacognitive skills. Therefore, developing this competence, i.e. empowering students to *wread* hypertext, requires a new approach to language learning, which focuses on all these four types of skills.

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Bearing in mind these reflections, we consider that the design of language learning webtasks should rely on a sound pedagogical framework which aims at a long-life learning process and implies both fostering learning autonomy and developing new multiliteracy competences (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kasper 2000; Luzón 2007; Villanueva et al. 2008). This involves tasks in which students adopt an active role and reflect upon their own learning preferences, the demands of the language task and the strategies that they will need to complete the tasks.

In this paper we put forward a proposal for the design of language learning webtasks that promote the development of new literacies applied to autonomous language learning. For this purpose, we first present the two keystones on which we consider that language learning webtasks should be based (i.e. the development of learner autonomy and the development of new literacies). We then provide an overview of existing proposals of web-based language learning tasks. Finally, we present our proposal for language learning webtasks which enable students to develop an autonomising wreading competence.

2. The psychopragmatic approach. A theoretical framework for the development of learner autonomy in digital contexts.

Research in the field of autonomy and language teaching and learning is closely intertwined with research on constructivism and socioconstructivism in the psycholinguistics field and on the psychopragmatic approach in the language learning field (Villanueva 2007), since these approaches provide a suitable background for successful development of learner autonomy.

Working on the basis of the Vygotskian premises (1984) and their reformulation in Bruner's socio-constructivist views (1984), the psychopragmatic approach pivots on the concept of effective learning, defining it as a process where the acquisition of new knowledge results from bridging old and new knowledge (i.e. scaffolding). Learning is viewed as an active, creative and socially interactive process to be constructed and not simply transmitted or transferred. This view of effective learning is intrinsically linked to the development of learners' metacognitive competence (i.e. "learning how to learn") (Ausubel 1968; Holec 1979; Bruner 1984; Villanueva 1992), which requires the personal involvement of learners in the whole process, participating in it in an active and conscious way. This necessarily implies the design of learning practices aimed at making two aspects explicit: i) learners' representations of the learning process (e.g., goals, contents, ways of learning, evaluation criteria, among others) and ii) learners' previous knowledge about the learning process (e.g., how languages are learnt, the teacher's and the learner's roles, teacher's expectations on a concrete task).

Additionally, learning to learn a language involves developing an active process of internalising and integrating the linguistic experience as well as acquiring instrumental procedures for learning (i.e. learning strategies) (Dickinson 1987; Oxford 1990; Wenden 1991). Such a process involves the use of i) methodological and metalinguistic competences (i.e. evaluating the acquired knowledge and being able to reorient the learning plan according to the results), as well as the development of ii) cognitive (i.e. inferring, deducing, generalising, making analogies, among others) and iii) metacognitive skills (i.e. developing critical thinking, organisational skills among others) (Dickinson 1987; Oxford 1990; Wenden 1991). In this approach, thus, learners are provided with challenging learning tasks, whose main goal is to construct learners' intellectual scaffolding to help them learn and progress in the different stages of their learning process.

In this respect, this approach takes into serious account what kind of comprehension processes may be involved in the different interactions (e.g., teacher-learner, tasks-learner,

learner-learner, etc.). It also considers a diversity of tasks, which are built from clear and workable parameters based upon real language usage. These parameters are designed according to the initial representation that learners have of real communicative interaction in order to maximise their learning potential and enhance it in a process-oriented approach that focuses on what learners do rather than on their outcomes. Such a process-oriented approach to learning does not simply lead to a better understanding of linguistic facts (e.g., structure and vocabulary) and a more effective acquisition of language proficiency; it also leads to greater learning competence as well as language awareness. Finally, significant knowledge is also taken into consideration. This only arises from the process of integration and enmeshment with individual thinking and previously acquired knowledge. Therefore, activities are designed making use of the analogical, inferential and contrastive tendencies of the human mind, as well as those cognitive processes that actually intervene in human conceptualisation and interaction.

The psychopragmatic approach and LA have a common ground that, transferred to the L2 teaching-learning field, is based upon a socioconstructivist view on learning and a discursive perspective on language. Therefore, such a pedagogical framework seems to be a suitable approach for an effective integration of ICT in the language learning field (Little 2001; The European Directorate General of Education and Culture 2003; Sanz 2003; Blin 2004; Villanueva 2006; Ruiz-Madrid, in press), since the unique features of ICT may respond to the demands of the pedagogical premises involved in the development of learner autonomy (i.e. promoting scaffolding, use of real language, a customised learning process, among others). In fact, working from psychopragmatic premises ICT allows for:

- flexible pedagogical proposals that can be felt as useful and as a source of self-esteem by the learner,
- an enjoyable context where learners and texts can converse in understandable terms,
- an environment that caters for the diversity of the learners cognitive profile/style, and their various learning needs and consequent choices.

In this respect, ICT allows language teachers to take into account how users may interact with the system, what kind of comprehension processes may be involved in the different interactions, and which way(s) may best anticipate and supply for both. In sum, it allows process-oriented teaching and learning practices, mainly focused on training users to understand and effectively “dialogue” with the hypertextual dimension inherent to the web. One of these practices is the teaching and learning of new specific literacies that are needed to cope with the idiosyncrasy of the web, such as a wide variety of textual forms (i.e. cybergenres), multilinearity, immediacy, among others.

3. Multiliteracies and language learning

When defining “multiliteracies”, Cope and Kalantzis (2000) refer to two closely related changes: i) the increasing significance of cultural and linguistic diversity, resulting in a wide variety of texts, and ii) the influence of new communications technologies (e.g., multimedia, the Internet), where texts are often multimodal, combining written-linguistic modes of meaning with visual, audio and spatial modes. It is increasingly difficult to function in the worlds of education and work without mastering the new literacies of today society. Students

need, therefore, to become multiliterate and be able both to manage cultural and linguistic diversity and to access and use information in different modes.

All definitions of multiliteracies include the ability to use a variety of technological resources in order to access, analyse and utilise information in different text formats (Kasper 2000; Leu 2000; Anstey and Bull 2006). In this sense, Kasper (2000: 106) states that “to be considered multiliterate, students today must acquire a battery of skills that will enable them to take advantage of the diverse modes of communication made possible by new technologies and to participate in global learning communities”. She considers that in addition to acquiring linguistic competence in English, ESL students must become functionally literate (i.e. “able to speak, understand, read, and write English”), academically literate (i.e. able to read, understand and produce different genres of academic written and oral discourse), critically literate (i.e. able to “evaluate the validity and reliability of informational sources”) and electronically literate. Kasper draws on Shetzer and Warschauer’s (2000) concept of electronic literacy as the ability to use electronic tools for communication, construction, research, and autonomous learning. Being electronic literate involves engaging in new thought processes, in order to interact with new text formats (e.g., hypertext and interactive multiple media), new reader-related issues (e.g., new purposes or motivations for reading a text, high-level metacognitive skills) and new activities (e.g., publishing online, participating in online synchronous and asynchronous exchanges) (Coiro 2003). An interesting point made by Anstey and Bull (2006: 23) is that being multiliterate involves being “cognitively and socially literate” with a range of texts and technologies but also being flexible and strategic, that is, “being able to recognise what is required in a given context, examine what is already known, and then, if necessary, modify that knowledge to develop a strategy that suits the context and situation”.

There is general agreement that, since electronic or digital literacy is a basic component of multiliteracy, pedagogy must rely on a careful analysis of digital texts and of the processes that students need to engage in to use and produce such texts (Coiro 2003; Anstey and Bulls 2006; Merchant 2007). The main features of digital texts pointed out in the literature are as follows (Sutherland-Smith 2002; Coiro 2003; Anstey and Bulls 2006; Merchant 2007; Villanueva et al. 2008):

- digital texts are fluid, not restrained by space limitations,
- digital texts can be easily revised and information can be removed, updated, added or rearranged,
- Web genres evolve at a faster pace than printed genres and are usually characterised by hybridity and multigenericity. This hybridity results in the blurring of boundaries (e.g., formal/ informal; public/ private; information/publicity),
- hyperlinks result in non-linear hypertext that interweave in complex ways, allowing the readers follow their own non-sequential reading paths,
- digital texts allow for high multimediacy and therefore are more densely multimodal than printed texts,
- digital texts are interactive, which results in the blurring and overlapping of the reader and writer roles. Readers can collaborate in text construction by replying, linking, posting comments and so on. Users can also interact with each other through communication tools such as electronic discussion boards or chats.

As Coiro (2003) rightly points out, these electronic text environments require new thought processes for making meaning and, thus, multiliteracy pedagogy must promote the development of new literacy skills. The following list of new literacy skills is distilled from work on multiliteracies and digital literacy (Burbules 1997; Lankshear et al. 1997; Snyder

1997; Leu 2000; Shetzer and Warschauer 2000; Sutherland-Smith 2002; Coiro 2003; Schmar-Dobler 2003; Villanueva et al. 2008):

- the ability to work in non-linear environments and to navigate hyperlinks skilfully in order to effectively locate and access the information needed. For this purpose, “readers need a new type of inferential reasoning to anticipate these differences and decide whether or not each hyperlink will enhance or disrupt their search for meaning” (Coiro 2003). In order to enhance their ability to hyperread critically (Burbules 1997), students need to reflect on how links work, i.e. how they connote relations between the texts they connect, which purpose they have within the text,
- the skill to use new search techniques (e.g., multiple search engines, manipulation of databases) to find information and draw on multiple strategies for finding information,
- the ability to read both the textual and the visual and thus understand and make meaning from multimodal, multimedia texts. It is necessary to train students to access, manipulate and respond to information that integrates a variety of symbols and icons and multiple-media formats. Students need to be able to distinguish between important visual graphics and ornamental ones and verify the credibility of graphics. All these abilities boil down to being skilful code breakers (Luke and Freebody 1997; Anstey and Bull 2006). Students need to be able to make meaning out of the various semiotic systems in a text, by understanding how these semiotic systems work on their own and in combination with others,
- mastering the language and the pragmatics of various forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication, both in one-to-one interaction and "many-to-many" electronic discussion forums,
- the ability to critically evaluate information. According to Burbules (1997), critical users of new technologies need ways to be selective about the information they find and multilayered ways of judging credibility,
- the ability to draw connections and synthesise pieces of information from different sources and multiple perspectives and to assemble them “into cogent viewpoints and arguments” (Lankshear et al. 1997). This involves being a capable meaning-maker (Luke and Freebody 1997; Anstey and Bull 2006). According to Luke and Freebody (1997), the major resource for meaning making is the student’s literacy identity, i.e. his/her previous literacy, social, cultural, and technological experiences. This literacy identity includes prior experience with texts any knowledge about texts, which shows the importance of raising students’ genre awareness,
- the all-encompassing ability to use text in real-life situations, e.g., online negotiations around a written text, using instructions to assemble a machine, or collaborative tasks in the workplace (Luke and Freebody 1997; Anstey and Bull 2006). When performing a task, texts users might work with different types of texts and multiple semiotic systems (e.g., linguistic, visual, auditory) and might need to interact with and through text in multiple modes (e.g., reading, writing, listening). Therefore, as Luke and Freebody (1997) point out, text users need knowledge about texts, their purpose, use, and structure, i.e. genre knowledge.

If we want to help students develop all these literacies and empower them to cope with the new reading and writing contexts that they will encounter in the future, we have to engage

learners in activities which prepare them for these new reading and writing practices and processes.

With the purpose of helping students develop the writing and reading competences necessary in the Cybergene Age, we take the “webquest/ language quest model” (Dodge 1995; March 1997; Luzón 2002; Koenraad 2006) as the general framework to design language learning tasks. However, we consider that, in order to promote learner autonomy, these tasks should be designed in such a way that they do not only allow language learners to improve their linguistic knowledge but also enable them to develop cognitive, metacognitive and intercultural strategies in all the different types of communication afforded by the new medium. In the remaining of the paper we will first describe the WebQuest model and the proposals to design language learning webtasks based on such model (e.g., Talent Quest), and then we will present our proposal for the design of webtasks that promote the development of new literacies applied to autonomous language learning.

4. WebQuests and Language Quests

4.1. WebQuests: an evolving format

We take the WebQuest format as a model for the design of webtasks, due to the fact that the principles underlying WebQuests are those of constructivism (i.e. students learn by transforming information and constructing their perceptions of complex concepts) and well designed WebQuests can provide support for and meet the criteria of major SLA theories. Therefore, this is a potentially suitable format to create activities that support autonomous language learning and multiliteracies competences.

The WebQuest was originally conceived as “an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet” (Dodge 1995). The key attributes for their creators were: i) authentic tasks, ii) use of Internet resources, and iii) development of critical thinking skills. With this idea in mind, they proposed a format including the following components:

1. An introduction that sets the stage for the activity and provides background information.
2. A feasible and interesting task, which usually engages students in answering a complex open-ended question or solving a real world problem. Working in small groups, students analyse the Web sites given to them by the teacher and complete a real world activity.
3. A set of information sources needed to complete the task: a few websites pre-selected by the teacher which provide background information for all learners, as well as specific websites for each student's role.
4. A description of the process the learners should follow to complete the task.
5. Evaluation, usually in the form of a rubric that sets the assessment criteria for the students.
6. A conclusion that closes the quest and encourages the learners to reflect on the process.

Since its creation, the WebQuest format has evolved and its creators have redefined it to meet the changing needs of learners and to harness the constantly developing capabilities of the Internet. In order to emphasise that a (real) WebQuest requires transforming information into a new understanding, March (2003: 43) provided the following definition of WebQuests:

A real WebQuest is a scaffolded learning structure that uses links to essential resources on the World Wide Web and an authentic task to motivate students’ investigation of a central, open-ended question, development of individual expertise and participation in a final group process that attempts to transform newly acquired information into a more sophisticated understanding. The best WebQuests do this in a way that inspires students to see richer thematic relationships, facilitate a contribution to the real world of learning and reflect on their own metacognitive processes.

According to this definition, the basic attributes of a WebQuest are the following:

1. Scaffolding, i.e. temporary support frameworks to help students only with skills which are beyond their capability.
2. Essential Internet resources, i.e. “Internet resources that are interactive, media-rich, contemporary, contextualized or of varied perspectives” (March 2003).
3. Authentic motivating tasks, i.e. tasks that meet Keller’s (1983) ARCS Model of Motivational Design. Tasks should get the students’ Attention (authentic tasks with relevant topics), should be Relevant to the students’ needs or interests, should inspire learners’ Confidence in achieving success and should leave students with a sense of Satisfaction in their accomplishment.
4. Open-ended questions which activate students’ prior knowledge and prompt them to investigate further.
5. Individual expertise, due to the fact that when students elaborate the answer to complete the task, there are differences in previous knowledge, effort and ability.
6. Knowledge transformation. The tasks should require students to construct an answer and transform input information into new knowledge.

In addition, March (2003) points out that the following learning strategies could greatly enhance WebQuests: helping students to see richer thematic relationships, getting students to test their newly constructed knowledge with real-world feedback and encouraging them to reflect on their own metacognitive processes.

In a later paper, March (2007) posits the need to refine again the WebQuest concept into a task “that could scaffold student use of Web 2.0 environments, enabling a shift toward authentic personal learning” (March 2007: 1). He revisits the four core aspects of WebQuests (student motivation, advanced thinking, rich learning resources, scaffolding) to propose paths to support students’ learning in Web.2.0 environments. In order to facilitate students’ intrinsic motivation, March (2007: 4) suggests focusing on the students’ perceptions that sustain motivation: “perceptions of control or autonomy; competence or self-efficacy; and relatedness of connectedness” (Ryan and Deci 2000). Focusing on these perceptions involves letting students choose at different stages of the tasks (objectives, roles to play, resources to use, steps to follow, task output). Regarding critical thinking, March draws on literature in the field to point out that students need both the capacity and the disposition to engage in high level thinking (i.e. tendency to explore, to be planful, to evaluate). In order to foster critical thinking through WebQuests, March suggests the use of *Thinking Routines*: “simple patterns or structures, used over and over again, that support and scaffold specific thinking moves or actions” (Ritchhart, Palmer, Church, and Tishman 2006), a strategy whose main purpose is to make the thinking of all the students more visible. As for resources, March argues for the need to see them in the light of the Web 2.0. frame of mind, where basic ideas are collaboration, interaction, content creation and sharing, and individual’s empowerment. Finally, scaffolding should be aimed at placing the learner in charge of the learning. For this purpose, March (2007: 8) proposes a scaffolding model which “integrates self-directed learning to promote

increases in student wellbeing and advanced cognition”, “CEQALL”- standing for the following phases: “Choice” (students should be given the opportunity to control their personal learning experience, choosing their own goals and outcomes), “Effort”, “Quality” (the teacher is a mentor to help students achieve learning outcomes that are valued), “Attitude” (positive attitude) and “Labor of Love”.

Dodge, the other creator of WebQuests, has also seen the need to adapt web tasks to the students needs. In this sense, Molebash et al. (2002) remark that real WebQuests are useful to promote structured inquiry², where students follow a prescribed procedure to investigate a question posed by the teacher (Herron 1971), but they cannot be used to promote higher levels of inquiry described by Herron (1971), such as “guided inquiry”, where students use their own designed/ selected procedures to investigate a question posed by the teacher, or “open inquiry”, where students formulate the questions to investigate and design/ select the procedures to follow. As can be seen, both March and Dodge, therefore, argue for the need to present students with activities which foster their autonomy and let them control the learning process.

Molebash et al. (2002) put forward “Web Inquiry Projects (WIPs)” (<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/wip>) as a more open-ended model, where students get less specific guidance in order to promote higher levels of inquiry. WIP are not in fact models to be used by students in the same way as WebQuests but teacher resources. In Molebash et al.’s words:

WIPs are intended to be used as inquiry roadmaps for teachers desiring to promote higher levels of student-centered inquiry, specifically by leveraging uninterpreted online data to answer inquiry-oriented questions. Unlike WebQuests, which provide students with a procedure and the online resources needed to complete a predefined task, WIPs will place more emphasis in having students determine their own task, define their own procedures, and play a role in finding the needed online resources.

WIPs provide teachers with six stages of scaffolding: “Hook” (a learning hook which makes students reflect on a topic), “Questions” (students ask questions related to the topic), “Procedures” (the teacher assists students in defining the procedures, including the type of data to be used), “Data Investigation” (students gather and investigate data, and, with the help of the teacher, assess their relevance and reliability), “Analysis” (students analyse and manipulate data and the teacher provides the tools to do it) and “Findings” (reporting findings and drawing conclusions). Only the first of these stages (the Hook) is provided to the learner, while the others are drawn on by teachers when necessary as they support students in their inquiries.

3.2. WebQuest for Language learning

Although WebQuests are not activities originally intended for language learning, several researchers have seen their great potential for this purpose, specially within the framework of task-based and content-based language learning (Felix 2002; Koenraad 2002; Luzón 2002, 2007; Ros i Solé and Mardomingo 2004; Richards 2005; Simina and Hamel 2005; Pérez 2006; Barros and Carvalhos 2007). We should remember that two basic attributes of WebQuests are authenticity of tasks (i.e., the basis of task-based learning) and rich authentic resources (i.e., the basis of content-based language learning). However, considering the use of WebQuests for Language Learning also requires a redefinition of the concept to make it comply with SLA

² Molebash et al. (2002) point out that there are some so-called WebQuests that are not in fact “inquiry-oriented”, since they are Internet Scavenger Hunts, where students have to answer questions by going to specific websites.

principles and to adapt it to language students needs. An interesting project in this line is the LanguageQuest project³, aimed at adapting WebQuests to the specific requirements of SLA (Koenraad 2006) and using this format for designing realistic, content-oriented functional tasks for language learning. A “TalenQuest” (the Dutch term for “LanguageQuest”) is defined as follows: “A TalenQuest is a WebQuest with a focus on foreign language learning. It is a venture that leads to a product and, in the process, triggers, in a natural way, a variety of effective learning activities.” (Koenraad 2006). Researchers working in this project have developed a useful set of criteria that should be taken into account to design WebQuests for effective language learning. They claim that tasks should:

- promote use of the target language,
- require the use of authentic materials,
- be open-ended and flexible and cater for students’ individual needs (e.g., more or less support, quantity and variety of materials, options in procedures),
- require meaningful communication to produce the output, and
- provide opportunities for reflection.

An important goal of Language Quests is to help students become autonomous and motivated learners by developing study/research skills and critical analysis. The suitability of the WebQuest format to foster language learning autonomy as well as to engage students in new reading processes required to understand digital texts and to construct knowledge out of them has also been pointed out by other practitioners (Ros i Sole and Mardomingo 2004; Luzón 2007).

Research on WebQuests for language learning has also emphasised that these tasks pose challenges different from WebQuests for other disciplines. When getting down to the design of Language Quests, teachers need to anticipate and reflect on how to overcome some difficulties, such as the students’ linguistic competence to understand resources and to use L2 to produce the output or the lack of direct language instruction, which makes it more difficult to focus on language (Pérez 2006). Pérez (2006) proposes some strategies to overcome these difficulties, e.g., asking less knowledgeable student to complete less complex tasks or offering them more linguistic support, stating linguistic and non linguistic goals explicitly, providing scaffolding appropriate to the students’ needs (background content, lexical and syntactical support, grammar guides, language workshop, aimed at helping students improve lexical, syntactic and language use aspects and practice language skills) or integrating the WebQuest into the syllabus.

5. A proposal for language learning webtasks

We take the “webquest format” (Dodge 1995; March 1997; Luzón 2002) as the general framework to design language learning tasks intended to develop an autonomising wreading competence, but we consider that such format should be adapted to promote the joint development of electronic literacies and of autonomous language learning. As has already been pointed out, a wreading competence involves much more than understanding the linguistic elements of a text (i.e. grammar and vocabulary elements). It involves understanding the digital nature of hypertexts, that is, how digital texts work, and being able to use them strategically to achieve a specific purpose.

³ For a detailed description of the project and the results, see the project website (<http://www.talenquest.nl>)

We consider that the design and implementation of Internet-based language learning tasks should be grounded on second language acquisition (SLA) principles (see section 4.2. above), constructivist theories and research on learner autonomy. In addition, it should also take into account research on educational technology, digital texts and new literacies. As researchers on the use of WebQuests for language learning point out, this format is based on constructivist theories and fit well with a task-based and content-based approach to learning languages. Drawing on such format teachers can design a collaborative learning environment, where students are provided with active and engaging real-like open-ended activities. However, in order to promote an autonomising wreading competence, these tasks should be designed in such a way that they raise language learners' awareness towards the complexity of online texts and enable them to develop the cognitive, metacognitive and intercultural strategies necessary for communication in the new medium.

The training in the new literacy of wreading should, therefore, be approached from a process-oriented perspective that affords the introduction of new types of specific abilities which are necessary in the Cyberggenre Age. In this new context, it is necessary to facilitate the development of specific skills where reading and writing competences meet to become an integrated wreading competence: i) technical skills of information elaboration and management (e.g. the ability to find valuable and relevant sources of information or the ability to evaluate the usefulness and relevance of online information in relation to one's purpose); ii) linguistic and semiotic skills (e.g. the ability to understand the lexico-grammatical and pragmatic features of online texts or the identification of the different communicative purposes and the possible audiences of a webpage or site); iii) cognitive skills (e.g. categorising and linking information), and iv) metacognitive skills (e.g. learning to evaluate hypotheses when using the links, and the results obtained, establishing different criteria in order to evaluate the language learning process).

In order to help students develop these skills, when designing language learning tasks special attention should be paid to two aspects: i) resources, and how to help students interact with them strategically; and ii) scaffolding/ learning supports which make for a strategic and reflective learning behaviour.

a. Learning resources

We consider that the following aspects should be taken into account when choosing resources for a task or when guiding students to select and choose resources themselves: i) the need to make students aware of the features of digital textuality; ii) the need, as March (2007) points out, to see resources from a Web 2.0 perspective.

Although some digital texts share purposes and forms with their printed counterparts, they usually have features that are unique to texts in the digital medium, e.g., they can link to many other documents in multiple media forms, they have fuzzy boundaries, they are dynamic and can be changed any moment. Thus, resources should simultaneously show the intertextual relations and generic echoes in digital texts and reflect the textual complexity of the web, that way training students into multiliteracies. This involves the use of resources which raise students' awareness towards:

- The multiplicity and complexity of digital genres and the highly dynamic and evolving nature of these genres. This will train students to cope with uncertainty and will help them understand that genre features are selected to fulfil specific purposes and meet the expectations of different audiences. Resources should be

used to help students understand digital texts by encouraging them to look for resemblances and intertextual links with printed texts.

- The multiplicity of semiotic systems (linguistic, visual, auditory and spatial). Resources should include documents which combine multiple semiotic systems and thus can help to train students to identify the types of systems used by different texts, the information conveyed by each semiotic system and the purpose for which these systems are used and combined in the text.
- The different hypertextual structures underlying websites. Digital texts tend to be hypertextual and interactive, forcing the users to choose the paths they want to follow in their reading process. Although hypertextuality is a common feature, digital texts vary greatly in their underlying structure and in their degree of complexity (Villanueva et al. 2008). Students need to be exposed to websites with different structures in order to learn to be strategic and make choices when navigating through and across sites with different structural complexity and to understand the linguistic and navigation clues in such sites.
- The multiplicity of languages and cultures that get linked and intertwined in the web, and the need to adopt an open attitude to other languages and cultures. Poliphony and multiplicity of perspectives in hypertext should be considered. If texts with different perspectives on a topic and different underlying ideologies are provided, students can learn to assess the text authority and to examine the role of language in shaping values and beliefs.

Seeing resources from a Web 2.0 perspective involves regarding them not only as information sources but also as tools that promote participation, sharing and collaboration in the construction of content and varied and authentic language interaction. In this sense, tasks can exploit the functionality of the web 2.0, reflected in new tools, such as blogs, wikis, social nets among others. Resources should be seen as tools to do things and students should be encouraged not just to get information in a passive way, but to act. Digital texts and tools offer multiple opportunities for action and for interaction with and through them, i.e. users can watch videos, participate in conversation, interchange and share documents and files, collaborate by adding to or modifying documents, register to do something, purchase and book products, etc. It is necessary to show students the options for action that texts and tools offer and prompt them to interact with texts in such a way that they learn how to engage with these texts. If students are given different possibilities for action, they are provided with the opportunity to make choices about which resources to use and how to use them to fit their purposes.

b. Scaffolding/ learning supports

McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) define scaffolding in the following way: “Scaffolding is a form of assistance provided to a learner by a more capable teacher or peer that helps learners perform a task that would normally not be possible to accomplish by working independently”. This kind of assistance is essential in order to make effective use of webtasks. Learners need support and tools which allow them to make the most out of such web-based tasks concerning learner autonomy development. This support includes tools for cognitive and metacognitive strategy development (Linn 1996; Ruiz-Madrid 2005; Luzón 2006) and technology-related strategies (Luzón et al. in press) in relation to the development of a wreading competence. Linguistic support also needs to be taken into account, with special emphasis on the role of

vertical (teachers/mediators-learners) and horizontal (peers) feedback afforded by the new collaborative and communication tools (McLoughlin 2002). We consider that all these aspects contribute to the design of webtasks “which provide the learners with support tools to enable them to complete the tasks, which promote learner independence through critical reflection and self-assessment and which provide for teachers and peer support and feedback” (Luzón 2006: 116).

Scaffolding tools and learning support need to be designed as integral parts of the learning process (McLoughlin and Oliver 1998), with the ultimate aim of helping learners become aware of their own learning process and, if necessary, make decisions about this process according to their own needs and the context in which these happen. The design of webtasks affords such an approach, since the flexibility of the hypertext affords the integration of learning supports to guide learners and the design of feedback mechanisms which are responsive and sensitive to their individual needs (McLoughlin and Oliver 1998; Ruiz-Madrid 2005; Luzón 2006).

Luzón (2006) distinguishes six different ways to help learners in an online language learning environment: i) helping learners to set their own goals, to decide how to achieve these goals and select materials according to them; ii) the selection and use of materials; iii) support elements that help learners to comprehend and thus complete the task; iv) support elements in materials that raise language awareness; v) the use of materials that raise learning awareness; vi) incorporating tools for assessment and feedback. Nevertheless, these six aspects could be grouped into two different categories, i) support elements that raise learning-awareness and ii) support elements that raise linguistic-awareness.

Concerning “raising learning –awareness”, the following support elements should be taken into account: i) “a clear task-structure”, ii) “a careful selection of materials” and iii) “metacognitive supports”. Webtasks need to be clearly structured, so that the steps to follow in order to complete the task and the relationships among the different sections of the task are clear and understandable for learners. Tasks also need to offer the opportunity to make choices, that is, learners should take responsibility and choose the most convenient path to their understanding in order to fulfil the task. Therefore, the information given in the tasks needs to be transparent for learners. New information needs to be linked to learners’ prior knowledge and activate learners’ cognitive strategies.

As for the materials and resources used in the webtasks, in addition to being selected according to the criteria discussed in section 5.a. above, they need to be evaluated by the teacher to make sure that they are suitable to the learners’ language competence and their language and learning needs. The number and type of materials and resources to be included in the tasks should be rich enough to respond to the different learners’ learning styles (i.e., different formats) and needs and limited enough to be relevant for the goals of the task and therefore avoid cognitive overload. This selection of materials should be presented to learners in an open way, so that they are able to take responsibility for their own learning and make their own choices. A possibility that should also be seriously considered is offering learners the option of looking for, selecting and evaluating their own materials and resources in order to fulfil the learning goals of a task. This option prompts learners to reflect on their own learning process (i.e. metacognitive-skills awareness) as well as to effectively search and discriminate web resources and materials (i.e. technical skills of information management development).

The two aspects mentioned above (i.e. a clear structure of the task and a careful selection of materials) are central when introducing “metacognitive support”. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 8) “students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions”. The use of a clear and understandable

metalinguage in the different sections of the webtask may contribute to helping learners develop an autonomous learning behaviour (Ruiz-Madrid 2005), and, consequently, be aware of their own learning process by setting their own goals and deciding how to achieve them. Furthermore, a previous evaluation of the materials and resources included in the webtasks may help learners choose the most suitable materials to achieve the learning goals of the task.

It is also important to incorporate tools for monitoring, feedback and assessment. Concerning monitoring, technology affords the possibility of incorporating communication tools that allow learners to have control on their own learning process, as for instance the introduction of tailor-made e-learning diaries or blogs. As for the tools for feedback, technology affords multiple possibilities for feedback delivery in online environments, from the use of forums that allow communication among peers or learner-teacher to the use of context-sensitive tools (i.e., help button) that can be automatically activated before or after a specific activity or that can be activated on learners’ demand. Regarding tools for self-assessment, self-evaluation and reflection, technology offers the possibility of combining quantitative (summative tests, qualifications, etc.) and qualitative methods (e.g., e-learning diaries). In order to help students evaluate not only the product of learning, but also the learning process, webtasks can include different online tests on learning styles, language competence, digital competences, learning or linguistic difficulties found in the activities, among others, whose results can help learners reflect on their learning process and accordingly choose the most convenient strategies to make the most out of it.

Finally, webtasks should also offer learners explicit specific help on the development of basic digital competences, so that they can become familiar with the textuality of digital texts and the online environment in which they are presented (Kasper 2000; Luzón et al. in press). Accordingly, when necessary, specific help on navigating modes, searching strategies on the web, use of specific programs and tools for the classification of resources, use of video tutorials about specific technical difficulties related to the use of the computer or the web, etc. should be offered as part of the support elements that contribute to raising learning awareness in webtasks.

As for the elements that “support linguistic awareness”, they include “a thoughtful selection of materials” and “appropriate linguistic input”. We consider that the materials selected for the task should contribute to i+1 learners’ linguistic proficiency development in particular, and to learners’ communicative competence in general. Accordingly, the selection of materials requires a previous linguistic evaluation by the teacher in order to assess their validity in terms of linguistic awareness support. It is also essential for the learners to receive help to understand texts with unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar. In this sense, Pérez (2006) makes special emphasis on the design of Webquests to improve FL reading comprehension in general and the acquisition of vocabulary in particular. She refers to previous research (Chapelle, 1998; Chun, 2001) that focuses on different techniques/procedures to help learners improve their linguistic competence. In the same line, Chapelle (1998) stresses the importance of making the linguistic characteristics of the target language salient by, for instance, highlighting the linguistic items in a different colour on the screen depending on their function within the text, the lexico-grammatical structure, their contribution to the generic articulation of the text, their semantic nature, etc, according to the linguistic goal of the activity proposed. Chun (2001) proposes the use of glosses that can include definitions, explanations, images, videos, sounds; of links to free online dictionaries previously evaluated and selected by the teacher, of communication strategies of repetition, simplification, redundancy; of grammatical explanations designed on purpose on specific structures that are present in the exercise or texts; of free online grammars previously evaluated and selected by the teacher or of free

online corpora, where learners can check the use of lexico-grammatical structures in different types of texts, among others.

These proposals to enhance learners' linguistic competence refer to CALL-based environments, where texts can be previously manipulated. It is obvious that the solutions these authors offer cannot be applied to web-based texts, since the characteristics of the texts (see section 3) make it a difficult task. However, these procedures should be seriously considered as part of training tasks previous to the webtask itself. Accordingly, learners could be trained into vocabulary and linguistic difficulty management and therefore they could be able to select and use their own resources to overcome it.

6. Conclusions

The affordances of the Web have brought about the appearance of new discursive and social practices that demand an active role of users, who need to become *wreaders* in order to cope in digital environments. Accordingly, web users should be able to understand, control and produce new texts and participate in new social environments, where immediacy and reciprocity are basic aspects. Taking into account these considerations, it seems obvious that the effective design of web-based tasks for language learning should involve placing the learner at the centre of the learning process. In this sense, ICT can help in the design of web-based language learning activities which meet the principles of learner autonomy. However, ICT does not generate by itself learner autonomy. In fact, it is necessary to carefully design learning tasks that foster the development of metacognitive strategies, that is, that prompt students to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. This thorough reflection on the requirements of effective learning tasks is also necessary to develop the new competences called for when using ICT resources and tools. Language learning researchers and teachers should design pedagogical proposals that respond to the demand of a new wreading paradigm. This wreading paradigm involves the development of specific skills such as collaboration, interaction and high-order capabilities of information management. These competences will help language learners manage the web complexity in terms of multigenericity, hybridism, multimediality, multifunctionality and interactivity (Villanueva et al. 2008).

In this paper we have proposed several criteria for the design of web-based language learning tasks which help students develop an autonomous learning behaviour, in which the development of the wreading competence is fundamental. Developing this competence requires a new approach to web-based language learning tasks, which integrate (i) technical skills of information elaboration and management; (ii) linguistic and semiotic skills; (iii) cognitive skills, and (iv) metacognitive skills. In the proposal for the design of webtasks presented here we have focused on two aspects that we consider key to help learners develop these skills. The first one is the selection of resources that can raise learners' awareness towards the features of digital textuality and the use of such resources not only as information sources, but also as tools to promote sharing and collaboration in the construction of content and authentic language interaction. The second aspect is the integration of learning supports which make for a strategic and reflective learning behaviour. These include support elements to raise both learning awareness and linguistic awareness. Further research needs to be carried out to test the validity of this proposal in terms of both learning awareness and linguistic awareness efficacy.

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