Connecting through Text: Reading Hypertext at the First-Year College Level

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Summary: Reading hypertext is still reading. Indeed, it demands the same kind of strategies of reading that instructors of foreign languages, long accustomed to treating an eclectic variety of authentic materials as texts of study, have been teaching for decades. Of this we can be proud. Far from avoiding the charge of base tourism in web-explorations of cultural topics, incorporating an informed and structured virtual tourism into our lessons is quite in keeping with our goals.

Despite the ever-increasing ease with which multiple forms of media become available through the internet, text remains the most common form of media in cyberspace. Text is the base medium through which the other internet media forms, sound and video, are delivered. Lately, there has been loud lamenting on the part of newspapers publishers, for instance, that they are losing their readership to the internet. The important fact about this shift, for our purpose at least, is that these people, the newspapers' former customers, remain *readers*, regardless of whether the texts they read are delivered on newsprint or on a computer screen. Using the internet, whether to download songs or to get the inside take on yesterdays events in Karachi, requires facility in reading.

As instructors of foreign languages, you are well aware of the tremendous

advantages ready access to current and authentic media, or even to realia for classroom use, that the internet brings. When I first started teaching German in graduate school, there was a collection of old restaurant menus some previous grad students had probably stolen when they were in Germany years before. These always made a big impression on students because they were authentic: they were in the kind of binders with advertising for a brand of German brandy, Asbach-Uralt, embossed on the covers, that you still might see in Germany and some of them had typewritten pages as used to be the practice there as here. Despite this authenticity, though, these menus always elicited comments from the more clever students who knew the value of the Deutschmark and would ask, "Wow, is it really that cheap to go out to restaurants in Germany?" Just this week I printed out the *Tageskarte* or daily menu from the famous Hofbräuhaus in Munich, a restaurant big enough and popular enough to publish these daily on the internet as pdf files. These also made a big impression on my students, not for their authentic binders, but simply because they bore last Tuesday's date. "Just think, this is what we would be eating if we were in Munich tonight," the seemed to think. (Those same students from before, the ones who know the current deplorable exchange rate for the Euro, still commented, but not because the prices were so low!) A great many companies, such as supermarkets and discount department stores, make their publicity available on the internet in this form now, and it can used to great effect.

But beyond collecting realia, the access to current authentic media is, of course, a great boon to our profession. In keeping with the theme of today's conference, connections, we must all admit that creating connections to the languages and cultures we teach has never been easier. This is particularly true for us Californians who teach languages that do not allow us to take advantage of the media presence that exists here in,

say, Spanish or Chinese. The value of using authentic, as opposed to didactized materials, in foreign language instruction has long been acknowledged and came about as a natural corollary to the communicative approach in the 1970s. The value of these materials certainly goes beyond the “excitement” some students might experience when handed a menu with the Asbach-Uralt label embossed on the plastic binder! I quote from the standard textbook of college-level language instuction, Alice Omaggio Hadley’s *Teaching Language in Context*,

> The use of real or simulated travel documents, hotel registration forms, biographical data sheets, train and plane schedules, authentic restaurant menus, labels, signs, newspapers, and magazines will acquaint students more directly with real language than will any set of contrived classroom materials used alone. […] The proficiency-oriented classroom will incorporate such material frequently and effectively into instruction at all levels (p. 97).

Now the value of these facts I have been talking about are well known to you. What I find useful when I read in the literature of applied linguistics is the critical distance that researchers in our field bring to our everyday practices. They afford us the chance to take a step back from what so quickly can become obvious and even routine. I must compare this critical distance to a current academic vogue in Germany, one which many believe has come to the rescue of the embattled *Geisteswissenschaften*, or humanities, i.e. media studies or, to use a term that is still a bit awkward in English, mediology. While the subject is by no means limited to Germany, the Germans have been especially effective in using this approach as leverage to maintain historical, philosophical, literary and art

studies as relevant to the more modern and profitable fields of film and television, marketing and management. These media scientists address media at the most basic level. They ask the simplest questions, such as "How does radio differ from television?" or "How does an image add to or detract from a text" or also, "How might a text be supplemented by an image or, vice versa, an image by a text?" The differences in how each of our senses, vision, hearing, touch, or the related "intelligences," respond to the information specific to them is of great interest. When we turn on the radio or the TV, we, naturally, do not give these differences much thought. Nevertheless, the differences are enormous. Our language reflects this difference: we watch TV, but we listen to the radio. I would refer to these differences with the sense more common in European languages other than English of the word "affect," in the specific sense of the manner in which each sense receives the "effects" emitted by a sound or image-producing device. What is interesting about these differences in media is, for lack of a better term, their physical or "material" difference. We regularly teach with video, sound files, and texts without always giving so much thought as to how these different media are received by our students. We come to consider them as commonplace samples of the language under study in which our students, having chosen to study this given language, should, we would hope, take an interest. Thinking about this subtle, "mediological," material difference, can however, inform our practice with useful results.

How might we think of hypertext from such a perspective? Hypertext is the received (if ugly) term for most of the text one may read in the internet. The abbreviation html, which is still the most common coding of pages on the internet, though it has been much improved upon, stands for "hypertext markup language." Nearly all web pages are

in hypertext. A hypertext differs from a printed text in that the reader is, on occasion, offered the choice to leave an author's text so as to view and read another text, image, or sound. The links within a hypertext page might be compared to conventions of printed text such as footnotes (and hyperlinks have come to replace this convention in online, academic writing), but they are necessarily, mediologically different. Just like footnotes, hyperlinks refer the reader to another text, but a great difference is that this reference can be made immediately, as opposed to a footnote that might require an arduous trip to the library. In addition to references to citations or further reading, the most common kind of footnote, a hyperlink within a foreign language text might provide a gloss of a word, as in some of the brilliant sites prepared for student and scholarly use, such as the Tufts University Perseus project, which offers all of classical European literature online in the original Greek or Latin with English translation, and where every word of text is prepared as a hyperlink that can provide a definition and complete morphology. There are numerous other sites devoted to canonical texts, such as the Dante site at Princeton or the Boccacio site at Brown University. But aside from such scholarly uses of hypertext technology, on the internet at large, as you are aware, a hyperlink can be made to any piece of media, be it text, sound or film, to which the hypertext author might wish to refer her or his readers.

This addition of active choice on the part of the reader presents both a challenge to us language teachers and great opportunity. In the context of the summer refresher course in teaching French as a second language at Laval University in Quebec City I attended summer before last, (a program I must recommend to any of you who know French), I undertook a research project on the question of reading hypertexts in foreign

language instruction. In this project, I used, as one important resource, the research of Linda de Serre of the University of Strasbourg (de Serres, L. 2004. « Paramètres pour une efficacité accrue de la lecture hypertextuelle en langue seconde ». Apprentissage des langues et systèmes d'information et de communication (ALSIC), vol. 7, 1, novembre 2004, pp. 131-152.) De Serre seeks to evaluate global comprehension of a hypertext. Her guidelines for presenting the text were to:

- Clearly define the obective of the reading assignment
- Encourage skimming of the text page
  - Restrict the number of hyperlinks accessed (especially in the case of students who experience difficulty in the skimming the original page)
  - Emphasize the importance of analyzing the non-textual components of the page

The hypertext in question consisted of text with related images. De Serres evaluated her subjects' comprehension of the text with a questionnaire that sought to evaluate a global understanding of the central text, its linked texts and its accompanying images. She found that a roughly equal level of understanding of the global gist of the information in question had been gained, even though the manner through which the students gained this information drew either primarily from the central text, primarily from the non-textual clues of the page, i.e., the images, or primarily from the secondary texts that were linked from the central page. The conclusion of her study in effect supports theories of diverse learning competencies and styles. In my opinion, going beyond de Serre, I would argue

that her research demonstrates that we might exercise too much caution in restricting students' full use of hypertext, and that, within a limited range of pre-chosen pages pertinent to the theme being addressed in a given lesson, say transportation or eating customs, learning can thrive when students are allowed to explore in accordance with their own interests and strengths. There are numerous older studies, some dating from the late 1980s, the earliest days of the use of the use of internet sites in foreign language teaching, that explicitly warn against any kind of internet reading assignment that might allow students to roam too far from the assigned reading. These researchers feared that the vast choices offered by hypertext would surely overwhelm the language learner or distract her from the learning task at hand. A 1998 paper by A. F. Manginot (whose name I cannot read without thinking of the similar-sounding Maginot-line, the enormous French line of defense in WW II that is famous for its utter failure), also of Strasbourg, warns that without sufficient constraints on "clicking" onto other texts, classroom readings in hypertext must inevitably descend into some common "*promenade touristique*." Now whatever one thinks of tourism, and there is doubtless much to criticize about its more mindless aspects, it contributes much, for those of us teaching languages such as French and German in California, to our bread and butter! Here at Moorpark College, at least, students are not enrolling in French out of an aching desire to read Proust *dans le texte*. There is probably no stronger draw for our students of these languages today than the prospect of traveling abroad, not as complete ignoramuses, but as educated tourists aware of the intricacies of the cultures they visit and knowledgeable of the languages of those places. In nearly every class I teach there is a student who has returned from a vacation abroad eager to improve herself and learn more about the places she has visited. These students then share their fascination with others in their class and

bring their personal travel experiences to our discussions. Overall, I think we instructors of foreign languages, perhaps particularly in the community colleges and particularly here on the West coast, should view tourism as an ally, with the proviso that we can contribute to a better, more informed kind of tourism. But perhaps tourism and language teaching is a topic for another day.

Given this position on travel, I am also convinced of the value of a kind of wide-ranging, virtual tourism on the web as a component of reading and cultural curricula. Hypertext possesses, in a way that traditional paper-based text does not, the ability to reproduce in its own architecture the structures of society and its institutions. I will demonstrate this shortly.

The challenges we face in presenting students with authentic hypertext materials are mostly just the same as those we encounter in presenting older media: first and foremost, we must be aware that students can become anxious and overwhelmed by their lack of understanding. And just as the challenge is the same, so too are the familiar techniques we have in our arsenal to mitigate such concerns. We suggest metacognitive strategies with questions such as "How do you read a web page in English?" "Do you start in the upper-right-hand corner, as you would reading a book? No? Then how do you do it? What do look at first? Do you focus in right away on what words or pictures that you do recognize or that you do not know or recognize?" A difference to print media here might be that experienced web browsers possibly look first to graphics and then to the links, this last a forward-looking reading strategy that one might compare to reading book prefaces or tables of contents. Another strategy at the metacognitive level is to

make clear to students the tasks they are expected to perform while reading. Are they reading to gain information? If so, then what is that information? At the cognitive level, one might also ask questions regarding, for instance, titles, subtitles or category headings, about images, image captions or linked passages. Another concern of the older literature on internet reading is the quality and reliability of resources. De Serres herself suggests that language instructors stick to texts based in the results of academic research, these, apparently, being the most reliable sources of information. This a horrible suggestion, as most such texts have little place in our courses. Many of our students seem to possess an immediate capacity to judge the quality of information to be found on a site by its overall look, by means of an esthetic judgment, something that is not 100% reliable, of course, but that is nevertheless a skill of reading of relatively recent origin that did not exist back in the days of "Joe's homepage" and that is not the same as judging a book by its cover. One direct method of controlling the quality of resources is to assign, even if as one question among many, a brief analytical summary of how a given page, say the homepage, was determined to be trustworthy, before permitting students to follow a link. Similarly, we might assign a summary of a specific thread. Also useful at this level would be a comparison of the site in L2 to sites of a type already known in L1.

Increasingly, we are teaching students very much at ease with reading online. Indeed, it is my suspicion that when reading online, many of our students already practice, albeit unconsciously, some of the strategies of reading that we foreign language instructors have advocated for years! There is something inherent in the medium that calls for, first off, a purpose in going to the site, then a skimming of the site for information specific to that purpose, then a summary employment of that information.

Reading on the web is always, already task driven, even when it is purely for pleasure. I further suspect that many of the same students who approach reading a web site in this informed way might not bring the same set of skills to reading an assigned text on paper. It is entirely thinkable that our post-millennial students experience greater anxiety at the suggestion that they read *Silas Marner* than that they book a flight on the German-language Lufthansa site.

To conclude, then, I wish to suggest that we allow our students to follow their own instincts when reading online, with the caveat that we adhere to received practices. These include, of course, a pre-reading activity to summon up the concepts pertinent to the reading (for foreign language reading this is often, for example, a thematic vocabulary “brainstorming” type activity), clearly defined tasks that allow for a very “material, hands-on” approach to the task (and this can be stated explicitly, students seem to love the notion of breaking into a text with their hands so as to break it to bits), and finally a post-reading analysis or evaluation of global comprehension.

Thus my real thesis here is that reading hypertext calls for a different kind of skill set than that usually assumed necessary to reading texts by our colleagues in L1 (by which I mean English), who by training often continue to think of texts as important monuments of human culture: novels, essays, poems, treatises, etc. We, in contrast, have been ahead of the times for many decades now in that the skills necessary for reading hypertext are those we teach regularly when we assign authentic, foreign language readings. Like the late French philosopher and UC, Irvine professor Jacques Derrida, who argued, when a laundry slip was found among Nietzsche’s papers on the back of

which the German thinker had scribbled the words "I habe meinen Schirm vergessen," ("I forgot my umbrella), that this slip is a Nietzsche text like all others and should be included in the Nietzsche corpus, we too have long been postmodern in the eclecticism we employ in choosing textual objects. We think nothing about treating bus transfers, DMV forms, menus or personal ads as text deserving of the same thoughtful approaches and attentive strategies of reading as one might give Charles Lamb's famous "Dissertation on Roast Pig" or Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. If this thesis holds water, then I think we have long been ahead of the times and that our practices have, in a sense, come of age and been vindicated by the way people need to read now. I think we should be proud of that!

Demonstration

As a demonstration of the idea that the architecture of website can mirror real world social structures, such as a school, I have created a web reading lesson using the most practical tool for making cohesive online lessons called "TrackStar," (http://trackstar.4teachers.org). The track in question was prepared in English for the sake of this presentation and is located at:

http://trackstar.4teachers.org/trackstar/ts/viewTrackMembersFrames.do?org.apache.struts.taglib.html.TOKEN=4eeea5dea470ba4d376e357f600e9a96&number=332878&password

The lesson first asks students to brainstorm the kinds of categories and links one would find on the website of a typical American high school. These typically present extra-curricular activities such as school sports, band, and social activities such as dances more prominently than they do academics. Students then visit the site of a German *Gymnasium*, where they learn first-hand the structure of a German school through their own experience of the site. They see that there is little mention of extra-curricular and social activities at the school, that sports are nearly non-existent there, that the German secondary school includes pupils from the fifth grade through to the thirteenth, and that the subjects taught are spread out over many academic years; for instance, students study biology over at least a five-year period rather than just for one year, as is the case in the American school. Students then are asked to work cooperatively to compose a short text outline the differences between the German and American schools.

References

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