The Importance of Word and World Knowledge for Successful Strategic Processing of Multiple Online Texts

Judith Riddell
The Queen’s University of Belfast, Belfast, UK

The importance of word and world knowledge has been widely acknowledged in the literature regarding literacy competence (Hirsch 2006; Boyd and Dubrow 2011). For those now learning in the digital age, many researchers have noted a number of additional competences. These competences include dealing with multiple texts and using strategic processing skills relevant to navigating hypertext as well as traditional print media (Anmarkrud, Braten and Stromso 2013; Coiro 2011; Alexander 2012).

This study focuses on a group of Year 11 girls undertaking independent online research to prepare for a group discussion for their GCSE English Language course. The study used think aloud protocols to identify the strategies used and record their understanding of the material they were reading. The participants also took screen shots of webpages viewed to record the number and type of webpages visited.

The participants were asked to search for information to help their discussion on an issue which was in the headlines at the time (whether the leader of Iraq should resign). This topic was pertinent to the broader issue of having an understanding of the world as well as the word to be competent in online literacy practices.

The outcome of this study suggests that these participants were impeded in their online searches by their lack of world knowledge and this brought further challenges to their strategic processing of the multiple texts which is part of the landscape of online searching. This raises questions for educators in relation to content as well as skills when considering implications for the curriculum. It also uncovers the importance of teaching strategic processing skills in all subject areas, so that pupils can benefit from the digital technologies inside and outside school. It is recommended that pre-service and in-service courses also address teachers' digital literacy competences and foreground these strategic practices to inform future teaching.
