



## Untangling the web: critical reading of foreign languages students in digital environments

### Desenredando la web: la lectura crítica de los aprendices de lenguas extranjeras en entornos digitales

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#### Palabras clave

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#### Abstract

This article analyzes how thirteen Spanish students of translation into English critically read an authentic text produced in the British community. Our three objectives are: a) to explore whether the learners identify the worldview contained in the text; b) to document and analyze the critical reading strategies and online resources they use to understand the text; c) to describe their perceptions of and attitudes towards their role as critical readers. We use qualitative methods to analyze various types of data: 1) responses to a task of critical reading comprehension and translation of a news article published in a British online newspaper; 2) five semi-structured interviews focused on the reading task, and 3) videos of the on-screen activity of five informants. The findings show that most of students fail to critically understand the text and that this is due mainly to the lack of awareness of the socioculturally situated nature of digital texts and the inefficient use of critical reading strategies and online resources.

#### Resumen

Analizamos la manera en que trece estudiantes de traducción inglés-español leen críticamente un texto auténtico de la comunidad británica. Nuestros tres objetivos son: a) explorar si los aprendices identifican la visión del mundo contenida en el texto; b) documentar y analizar las estrategias de lectura crítica y recursos en línea que emplean para comprender el texto; y c) describir sus percepciones y actitudes acerca de su rol como lectores críticos. Empleamos técnicas cualitativas para analizar varios tipos de datos: 1) las respuestas a una tarea de comprensión y traducción de una noticia publicada en un periódico digital británico; 2) cinco entrevistas semiestructuradas centradas en la tarea de lectura, y 3) vídeos de la actividad de las pantallas de cinco informantes. Los resultados muestran que buena parte de los estudiantes no logra comprender críticamente el texto y que este hecho se debe sobre todo a la escasa conciencia sobre el carácter situado socioculturalmente de los textos y al uso ineficaz de estrategias de comprensión crítica y recursos de lectura en línea.

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## Introduction

Thanks to the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), language students are gaining access to a wide range of digital texts in foreign languages (FLs). These texts diverge from their hard copies in terms of format, design or layout of dynamic spaces linked among them, and also in terms of disclosure or concealment of the message's author, privacy level and quality control of information (Cassany, 2011; Herring, 2007).

These modifications affecting the nature of educational practices and digital texts substantially alter the concept of reading comprehension. Reading on the Internet makes playing a more active and a critical role more necessary and important when interpreting and implementing strategies to identify problems and when searching, finding, selecting and evaluating information (Leu, Coiro, Castek, Hartman, Henry and Reinking, 2008; Warschauer, 2000).

This is even more necessary in the case of students of FLs that read authentic digital texts (i.e., not developed for learning purposes), since their language skills are poorer in their pivot language compared to those when reading in their mother tongue (MT), and they have poorer knowledge on the culture, the society, the rhetoric and the way of life and the way to communicate of the linguistic community in which the text read by them was generated (Cassany, 2004; Hanna and de Nooy, 2009; Kramsch and Thorne, 2002).

This fact raises questions about the way research and teaching practices of reading in FLs can be adapted to the new communication demands. To date, the body of research that studies critical reading in FLs is limited and mainly focuses on reading on paper (Koh, 2004; López-Ferrero and Martín-Peris, 2010; Wallace, 2003). Regarding electronic format, research focuses on reading in one's MT (Coiro, 2003; Coiro and Dobler, 2007; Fabos, 2008; Henry, 2006) or it is limited to point that online texts can potentially develop critical

comprehension and offer pedagogical suggestions (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2003; Walz, 2001). Only Levine, Ferenz and Reves (2000) and Murillo (2009) deal with how do students behave when they read digital texts in a FL critically. Likewise, these studies were performed in closed virtual environments (as in the case of Levine et al., 2000) or semi-open (as in the case of Murillo, 2009), which reduces the scope of students actions when reading, since they cannot do searches, consult or carry out other activities that they would do in a true "reading on the web" scenario.

To overcome this gap of knowledge on critical reading in a FL, we propose to analyse the extent and level of the critical role played by a group of students of English as a FL when reading a digital text produced by and for the community speaking that language. This objective is made up of three parts:

- Exploring the way students of FLs identify and construe their world view underlying in the contents of a website with an ideological charge: analysis in how they detect the position taken by the author and by those social groups represented; how they recognise the cultural values contained in the text and how they identify the function and effects intended to have on the audience.
- Documenting the strategies and resources used by students when reading a digital text in a FL: describing how they identify comprehension problems or needs; how they search, find and select relevant data on the net in a totally open virtual environment, and how they evaluate their validity and reliability.
- Analysing the students' perceptions and attitudes towards their own role as critical readers, noting their awareness of the socio-cultural and ideological charge of discourses, the need to read texts critically and the difficulties thereof.

## Conceptual framework

In this study, we integrate two theoretical approaches that adopt coherent, complemen-

tary views on literacy, that is, on the “knowledge, social practices, values and attitudes related to the social use of written texts” (Cassany and Castellà, 2010, p. 354). We are referring to the studies on New Literacies and Critical Literacy.

The research carried out under the designation “New Literacies” analyses the qualitative transformations generated by nowadays’ technological and social conditions when producing, interpreting, distributing and exchanging texts by electronic means. It also analyses the practices of learning and the acquisition of digital knowledge performed with these texts (Coiro, 2003; Cope and Kalantzis, 2013; Lankshear and Knobel, 2011).

In view of the increase in the quantity and diversity of the sources of information on the net for students of FLs, New Literacies have explored the transformations that digital literacy practices create when learning FLs generally and written skills more specifically (Barton and Lee, 2013; Thorne, 2008, 2013). In short, the new features of reading online in a FL are:

- *Multimodality*. Digital texts integrate multiple semiotic modes such as video, audio, photography or graphic design. They support comprehension because students do not depend only on their linguistic knowledge of the FL to construct the text’s meaning in order to put it into its cultural context and to recognise the social discourses transmitted. On the other hand, reading multimodal texts requires using specific knowledge and interpretation strategies for each mode or semiotic resources which converge in a text.
- *Textual heterogeneity and intertextuality*. There is no consistency in the format or style in which information is presented on the net. Genres, designs and registers are juxtaposed and the reader has to handle heterogeneous texts simultaneously. In addition, the digital text is more intertextual: it contains multiple voices from different authors, organisations and communities. Some studies emphasise the potential of intertextuality of digital texts to bring students of FLs into contact with different world views (Lam,

2009), as well as the difficulty to identify the different voices contained therein and recover the relations existing among them.

- *Hypertextual organisation*. The net distributes contents, resources and materials in fluid, open and interconnected environments. The different pieces of information are related through links, pop-ups, dynamic texts or new tabs. These processes make online reading comprehension easier to students of FLs since they make explicit the thematic, cultural, ideological and intertextual relationships with other texts, discourses, elements, figures or events (Eveland, Marton and Seo, in Wilber, 2008, p. 578). Nevertheless, the non conventional architecture of information on the net may seem strange and puzzling to those readers used to linear sequences, and may also be puzzling when getting around the net or when deciding on what to read and the order thereof.
- *Quality control of information*. In most of the net there is no control on the nature and the sources of information as the purposes, interests, functions and world views of the responsible social entities are difficult to establish. In addition, thanks to web 2.0 and participation culture, all Internet users can add, manipulate and comment on contents of other users and, as a result, some concepts such as message authorship or information reliability are altered (Coiro, 2003; Kramsch, 2009).
- *Multitasking*. Many digital devices enable to perform multiple activities simultaneously. This fact enables students of FLs to use different tools to compensate their shortcomings in the FL (dictionaries, translators, etc.) or in the culture of the text read (encyclopaedias, thematic websites in different languages, etc.). Thanks to multitasking, the role of prior knowledge is altered, which can be compensated by their knowledge on online information organisation or information search strategies. But if student of FLs do not have a good command of these information management strategies, they can feel

overwhelmed due to the great amount of data that can be accessed immediately.

In this context, New Literacies converge with theoretical proposals of the so-called Critical Literacy for the affirmation of the model of active reader who constructs but also extends and evaluates his/her own interpretations. Critical Literacy is linked to Critical Pedagogy and Paulo Freire's theories, as well as to the Critical Analysis of Discourse (van Dijk, 2009), which holds that critical comprehension of a text implies identifying the vision of reality which it offers and the mechanisms used to represent it.

Critical readers are autonomous and aware of the fact that the meaning of texts is inseparable from the historical, cultural and institutional circumstances in which it is generated (Cassany and Castellà, 2010; Fabos, 2008; Luke, 2014). For this reason, they use strategies to search, find and evaluate information in order to understand the contents provided in a text, the relationships of the latter with the contexts in which they were generated, their functions and how they intent to position the reader.

The implementation of strategies of management and critical analysis of information is essential when reading online in a FL to make up for the deficit of knowledge along with the linguistic and cultural resources used in the texts read (Cassany, 2004; Wallace, 2003). According to Thorne (2008, p. 416), when reading online in a FL "linguistic form and discourse competence continue to play roles, but in the service of cultivating the capacity to make collectively relevant meanings in the inherently intercultural contexts of everyday life".

## Methodology

We are using a qualitative methodology (Cresswell, 2013; Gil and Cano, 2010; Yin, 2010) that combines techniques from ethnography (interviews, snapshot compilation), analysis of content (identification, codification and categorisation of the meaning axes underlying in the data) and analysis of discourse (interpre-

tation of the discourse's meaning noting the relationships between its linguistic elements, its context and its social meanings). Thirteen students performed an individual comprehension and translation assignment of a piece of news from *The Guardian*<sup>1</sup>. After analysing their translations, we interviewed them to find what they understood from the text, the difficulties they faced and the resources and strategies of online critical reading used to solve them. Five of them also provided us with snapshots from their computers while they were on their assignment. These 13 Spanish students were first year students of the degree of Translating and Interpreting from Universitat Pompeu Fabra, with Spanish/Catalan as their mother tongue and a level of English higher than a B1 level (CERF), as well as different competencies in another foreign language.

We chose a piece of news from the Education section of *The Guardian's* web site that: a) had a level of linguistic difficulty suitable to the level of English of the students, b) had a quite explicit ideology (progressive, feminist and pro equality), and c) required the students to use resources to search, find and interpret online information since it contained cultural references and elements that are specific from the British community.

The piece of news was about the creation of the *Girls' Network* social aid programme for teenage women coming from disadvantaged communities and neighbourhoods. This programme brought these young women into contact with other women from different professional fields, who acted as mentors and helped the teenage women with their academic and professional development. It reported the existing inequality of success opportunities for gender and socioeconomic reasons in the United Kingdom. Other issues with an ideological burden were the connections between races, immigration and socioeconomic status or the differences of the social policies put into practice by the different British governments over the past years. The piece of news included a picture of two teenage women who were



members of *Girls' Network* and its creators in the City of London, as well as some links: a) to the author's profile and other articles written by her; b) to websites of the programme and other associations advocating for women's rights, and c) to websites of some celebrities volunteering in this programme. At the end of the piece of news, comments by the readers thereof could be found.

## Data collection

Our data come from three different sources:

- *Assignment*. The comprehension and translation assignment took place during a one hour class of the subject *Translation 1 EN* of the first year, in the computer room where the subject is usually taught. Through this assignment, we made a *translation request* to the students based on the functionalist theories (House, 2008; Nord, 2014): "You have been tasked with translating this article for a Spanish newspaper".
- Despite translation assignments have not been used very often when designing comprehension tests, we believe this kind of activity was natural and usual to this group of students, therefore prevented research from disrupting or hindering the pace of the class. We also believe that translating is a suitable activity to study critical reading due to the high and detailed level required thereby and to the fact of generating a translated version in the MT of the original text in a FL, which offers empirical evidence of the comprehension level attained by the students.
- The students performed the assignment individually; for this reason, our corpus includes 13 translation assignments. The total number of words to be translated by the students was 212 and their translations had an average of 245 words.
- *Interviews*. We did semi-structured interviews to the informants the week after the assignment was done. Interviews were made up of three parts derived from the three objectives of the study: a) questions

to find the level of global comprehension of the text, its context and its ideology (the author's point of view, function of the text, social groups represented and advantaged, etc.); b) questions about the translation of a set of elements from the text (parts especially indicative of its feminist and progressive ideology, cultural references, etc.) as well as about any difficulties found to understand these elements and the resources and strategies used to solve them; c) questions to find the students' attitudes and beliefs about their role as critical readers (importance of having knowledge on the socio-cultural context, importance of identifying the ideological charge, the difficulties and particularities of online reading in a FL, etc.). Nevertheless, within this general scheme, questions were adapted to the interviewed students according to the analysis of the translations that was previously made. Interviews took place in a classroom with two laptops with access to the net and with the original text in English and the translation of each informant to comment on specific details. Given that the study took place within the curriculum framework of a degree subject, the interviews had a tutorial and training nature. We interviewed the students in groups of three (excepting student no. 7, who was interviewed individually) to promote debate with the students on the different ways to improve their levels of critical comprehension.

We have 225 minutes of audio in total. The average duration of each interview in groups of three people is 50 minutes, whilst the individual one lasted for 20 minutes.

- *Snapshots*. Five students out of thirteen voluntarily agreed that Camtasia program captured in video format what happened on their computer's screen while doing the assignment. The average duration of each video capture is 40 minutes, totalling 194 minutes of recording time. These records enable to explore more deeply the students' behaviour when reading online in a FL: how they scroll up and down, display attached

multimodal elements; how they search, find and select information from external sources; the linguistic and consultation resources used by them; their knowledge on how is information organised on the web.

- *Ethics*. The students signed a consent form of data assignment that meets the ethical standards applicable to research set forth by UPF University. Thirteen informants assigned their data derived from the translation assignment and only 5 gave their consent that their computer screens were recorded.

## Analysis

In first place, we corrected the students' assignments according to the parameters normally used to get an overview of the level of critical comprehension attained and to design the pattern of the interviews. We then did the interviews, made audio recordings, transcribed them partially and analysed them using discourse analysis techniques (Bloome et al., 2008; Gee 2011). During this process we noted details of the students' discourse such as the lexical, grammar and thematic selection, the organisation of information, intonation, communicative style, stereotypes and references to models or cultural patterns contained in their interventions. In the context of this interview, these elements were relevant to understand how they faced the reading assignment, the resources used to solve it and their attitude towards it. In last place, we inductively analysed the snapshots using content analysis techniques (Bernete, 2014; Raigada, 2002) with CAQDAS Atlas-ti. This process was based on data coding in a set of categories arising from the video records that where in turn related to the conceptual framework and the objectives of this research. In total, we got 21 categories. These are a few examples of the categories: "detection of comprehension difficulties of a linguistic nature", "detection of comprehension difficulties of a cultural nature", "appropriate selection of the language when searching information", "monitoring and adaptation of the search terms", "selection of the appropriate linguistic

resource", "knowledge on the organisation of information on websites" or "verification of information sources".

The data collected from different sources and through different qualitative analysis techniques allowed to triangulate the results obtained during our fieldwork to be provided with greater validity.

## Results

These are the results from specific subsections that correspond to the three objectives of this research.

### Identification of the world view

#### *Comprehension of the ideology, values and social groups represented in the original text*

Three students (E9, E12 and E13) were able to identify the world view contained in the text without any guidance from researchers or other mates. For example, E13 defined the text as "quite progressive" and "advocating for women's rights". In E9's words, the text intends to "promote a bit the awareness that women still are... not undervalued but... at a lower professional level compared to men". According to E12, the objective of the piece of news is "raising awareness employment discrimination of women in the United Kingdom and... a phenomenon that occurs in all countries". They also perceived other ideological elements, such as the relationships between job opportunities, social class or immigration (E9) or the jobs that are more prestigious according to the text (E12 and E13). When asked about how they identified this view, they referred to specific passages or elements of the text, just as E9, who referred to the picture. They did not refer to other indicators, such as the newspaper's editorial line, the author's profile or the contents of *Girls' Network* official website.

Four students (E1, E4, E6 and E10) detected the general feminist ideology of the text. They did not perceive other ideological elements related to immigration or the social recogni-

tion of certain jobs. Regarding the strategies used, they only mentioned the article's title; for example, E10 answered: "the same topic dealt with, stating that women are professionally undervalued...". Other indicators, such as the newspaper's editorial line, were not mentioned, despite that E4 and E10 deducted it from the article's topic; for example, E4 stated "I do not think this article belongs to a conservative newspaper, since feminism does not...".

Three students (E2, E8 and E11) identified the feminist ideology of the article with the help of the comments made by the researchers or by other students attending the interview. They were not aware of the strategies required to detect the world view; for example, E11 stated "You can see it when you read the article". E3, E5 and E7 were not able to identify the article's ideology or to describe any potential strategies to detect it.

#### *Identification of the text's function and effects intended on the reader*

The students recognised that they do not reflect on issues such as the function of the original text in its initial context or how the author intends to predispose the audience; only E9 stated that he/she reflected on these issues "fleetingly". With the guidance of researchers, they were able to identify different functions of the text such as "informing", "raising awareness", "promoting", "criticising", etc.

In the course of these comments, E9, E12 and E13 went further and identified the purposes of the text. E9 argued how the piece of news serves its purpose of doing political criticism: "...when it refers to two foundations [assisting women] previously created with one of the... with a centre-left party and the coalition later dissolved both of them". E12 and E13 also argued that the text aims at rising funding; E12 stated "well, the article also solicits ... donations for the organisation".

Four students (E1, E4, E6 and E10) were not able to perceive all these purposes but they noted that the piece of news had a persuasive

purpose before researchers mentioned it. E6 explained: "[The text] also includes an opinion, doesn't it? I mean, I found it ... besides its informative nature, it was not neutral".

Six students (E2, E3, E5, E7, E8 and E11) were not able to identify the functions of the text without the researchers' guidance.

#### **Critical comprehension strategies and online resources used**

##### *Identification of comprehension problems*

All the students identified their problems of literal comprehension of concepts and the use multiple online resources to solve them, such as monolingual dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, initial and abbreviation dictionaries, linguistic forums, text alignment programs and translators. The differences among the students specially remain on the strategies used to detect those comprehension problems of a critical nature and related to the socio-cultural context.

Four students (E6, E9, E12 and E13) perceived more clues in the text or in other multimodal elements indicating them what part of its sense escaped them. For example, E6 used the browser of the newspaper's website to know what kind of piece of news he/she was reading and the nature of the section it was included in. E9 paid attention to the picture, which enabled him/her to see the difference between the teenage women registered with the programme, its creators and the financial district at the bottom, and to deduct the social charge of the text. E13 used browsers quite often to get information on cultural references and also used consultation websites (Wikipedia in English and British websites on education and politics). E12 searched information online on several people mentioned in the text and that way he/she realised that they were successful British women who were in the position to be a model and support for young women from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Two students (E1 and E10) did not pay so much attention to the elements that offer clues on the socio-cultural framework of the text (navigation menus, picture, and links) or used specific consultation websites. But when they ignored a cultural reference, they often used search engines and other general resources (Google Images and Wikipedia in English in most cases).

Four students (E2, E4, E5 and E8) usually were content with literal comprehension. They used online linguistic resources efficiently (dictionaries, translators, forums, etc.), but they hardly consulted other kind of information. Sometimes, when they translated cultural references that are relevant to interpret the text, they left them in English. When answered about their meaning, they answered that they did not know it. They sometimes identified the comprehension problem but believed that the effort implied when consulting certain online sources was pointless. For example, in a snapshot we can see how E4 entered some cultural references in the Google search bar, but he/she erased them before completing the search.

Three students (E3, E7 and E11) were only worried about literal comprehension, which is inaccurate sometimes. For example, when asking E3 about the meaning of an expression he/she translated wrongly, he/she answered: "I looked for it "as it is", right? It was on WordReference". E11 answered in reference to the same problem: "I do not know. It was on the Royal Spanish Academy's website... I am serious". E3 did not repeatedly note any difference in the kind of difficulty he/she was facing; for example, when he/she read *Guardian columnist and campaigner Fiona Miller*, he/she searched "Guardian" in a general dictionary such a WordReference, without noting that it was a proper name (capitalised) or that it was the newspaper where the piece of news was published.

### *Searching information*

When using Google search engine, all the students knew the language they had to use to get more relevant results and use keywords. For example, E13 did searches as "senior judiciary court UK" to obtain information of magistrates' courts in the United Kingdom. E3 was an exception, since he/she normally used a natural language that generated irrelevant results; for example, one of his/her searches was as follows: "how are women working in finance called".

Three students (E6, E9 and E13) had more strategies and resources when searching linguistic information. When they had doubts regarding lexicon, they adjusted the terms used according to the kind of expression; for example, they used "[element desired] stands for" ("CEO stands for") to consult abbreviations, or "[element desired] meaning" and "[element desired] definition" to look up the meaning of common names, adjectives or verbs. If they knew the field to which the expression refers, they included it in the search parameters; for example, E9 wrote "MP stands for in politics" and immediately retrieved the expression "Member of Parliament", which is the appropriate meaning in that context. If they did not know the field or the register to which it refers, they tried to look it up in different resources (online *slang* dictionaries, acronym dictionaries, etc.). If they did not know a complex lexical unit, they broke it in different ways until they obtained relevant results. That was the case of E13 who, when looking the expression *FTSE 100 CEOs* up, searched "FTSE", "FTSE 100", "100 CEOs" and "CEO" until he/she understood that *FTSE 100* is the main exchange index in the UK and *CEO* is an office equivalent to executive director. They knew a wide range of linguistic resources (monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, acronym dictionaries, forums, translators, style guides, etc.) and chose the most suitable one based on the nature of each problem.

Most of the students (E1, E2, E4, E8, E10 and E12) also know quite a lot of linguistic resour-



ces, although they normally use WordReference dictionary and Google translator. Four students (E3, E5, E7 and E11) only used WordReference bilingual dictionary (English-Spanish), with some irrelevant exceptions.

Regarding those cultural references and difficulties that cannot be solved through linguistic resources, three students (E1, E12 and E13) used Google search engine and showed a great ability to monitor and adapt search terms with more specific or general words based on the results obtained in the dropdown menus; this way, they obtained results that were increasingly relevant after each search. On the other hand, most of the students (E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E10 and E11) had limited search strategies when they did not obtain that information of cultural nature which they needed at their first attempt. They normally used the same keywords several times although they did not show relevant results.

#### *Finding information*

In general, all the students knew how information is organised in the linguistic resources and used their knowledge efficiently. For example, when they used online dictionaries, the students knew how to find the different meanings, the examples, idioms or the discussion threads generated about a specific use of language. Likewise, when they used automatic translators to check a specific lexical unit, the students knew how to find its definition, its most common translation and other alternative translations and, when they checked terms classified in different morphological categories in English (for example, *shock* can be both a verb and a substantive), they found the grammatically correct translation.

Regarding their knowledge on how information contents in English language are organised, such as digital news, Wikipedia entries or websites on specific cultural issues (for example, websites dealing with politics, press or education in the UK), the students did not have any problem to find and select the

information they needed if it was on the same site which they checked. Nevertheless, if the information they need was not on the same website which they checked but on a website related thereto (through a link, for example), the students showed difficulties to find the resources that may get them to find it, to foresee the contents each link or tab may lead them to or to select the most efficient hypertext reading route. In general, not a single student used the links contained in websites in English, even those contained in the piece of news which they were reading. When they found cultural references that they would not understand and had a hyperlink, they would rather make new Google searches, which was a waste of time and provided them with less relevant results.

A recurring pattern of behaviour in all students is that they invested more time on browsing and *scanning* the list of obtained results thanks to the search engine (with the basic data of each result) than on the specific search of each one of them (by clicking on the link and reading the relevant result carefully). The students could find keywords on a list of results to understand the meaning or the main meanings of the items quickly and find pictures of the references. Despite this was a frequent strategy, not all the students showed the same proficiency. Whilst two students (E10 and E13) were able to find the most suitable results to find the information they needed from a list, the other 11 students showed difficulties to find relevant results (both in their MT as in their FL); they normally clicked on the first results of the list without paying attention to the relationship between their content and the piece of news, so they wasted time going back repeatedly and making new searches until they found the desired information. Four students (E2, E3, E4 and E11) were not even able to solve their comprehension difficulties related to several cultural references they did not know, despite making Google searches. These difficulties were aggravated when the expressions they searched were abbreviations; for example, in connection with the abbreviation MP, E2 and

E3 found and selected the result “member of the Pharmacy Professional Association” and E4 and E11 selected “London Metropolitan Police”. Similarly, in connection with the abbreviation *FTSE 100*, E11 selected the result “Full Time Student Equivalent”, which makes no sense in this context.

### *Evaluating information*

The students showed different strategies and levels of awareness regarding the importance of evaluating information.

Five students (E1, E9, E10, E12 and E13) usually checked several linguistic resources when they found an expression that was unknown to them. They also noted the interpretations they made match the context of the piece of news by using other tools such as Google Images, Wikipedia or other information websites. This way, regarding the difficulties found to understand an abbreviation contained in the text, (*FTSE 100*), E9 explained: “I looked it up in different websites. I started with acronymfinder. Then Cambridge and WordReference so that I could make myself an idea. I then checked Wikipedia and Google to see if it was what I thought and if it matched properly...”. Another clear example is the reference to successful women who collaborate as mentors of the teenage women: *yachtswoman Tracy Edwards*, a famous elite sailor, and *campaigner Fiona Millar*, an education rights activist in the United Kingdom; to understand this part of the text, these students checked different dictionaries to build up the meaning of their job names. They also noted that their interpretations matched the content of the piece of news by searching pictures and information of these women and made sure that their interpretations made sense according to the socio-cultural framework of the text. When comprehension problems were related to cultural references, E12 and E13 normally checked two websites.

Four students (E4, E5, E6 and E8) only checked linguistic sources (dictionaries normally) when they found difficulties to

understand a lexical unit. They did not check whether their interpretations were correct; this fact made them select wrong meanings sometimes. For example, E3 and E5 translated *yachtswoman* as “the woman sailing a yacht” without noting that Tracy Edwards is a sailor. Similarly, E3, E5 and E6 translated *campaigner* as “political candidate” and E6 translated the term as “defender” instead of “activist”. Nevertheless, when difficulties are related to socio-cultural elements, the students only checked one information source (Wikipedia in English or other websites).

Four students (E2, E3, E7 and E11) only checked one linguistic resource (WordReference in English-Spanish) to solve comprehension problems. They hardly ever used other tools and do not have solid strategies or procedures to evaluate the reliability and plausibility of their own interpretations. When asked how they make sure that they selected the correct meaning for an element having different possible meanings, E2 and E7 answered that through intuition. Other students justified their choices by saying “it was on the Internet”.

### *Attitudes towards the assignment*

#### *Awareness of the socio-cultural and ideological nature of the texts*

The students showed different levels of awareness regarding the importance of placing texts in their original socio-cultural context and of identifying the underlying world view. Four students (E1, E9, E12 and E13) believed that knowing the context has implications beyond the geographical issue. These students believed that the context does not only enable to understand the cultural references contained in the original text, but also certain contextual elements (such as the comparison between the neighbourhoods where the girls registered with the programme live and London’s financial district) enable to explain the social protest contained in the piece of news. In this sense, E1 explained “I suppose that the contrast between the poor neighbourhood of the girls and the

financial district is an important fact... because the girls had never seen... women going to work in a suit in their neighbourhoods”.

Three students (E4, E6 and E10) believed that it was important to place the text in its context because it enables to understand its cultural references; similarly, E4 explained “I did not know what the City of London is. If I knew, I would have understood the text correctly, of course... who CEOs are and so on...”. They were also aware that the piece of news contains a set of ideological values; for example, E10 said “Sure, newspapers are left or right-wing and deal with news in very different ways”. They did not think that it is necessary to identify those values to understand the text or that they have an influence on their interpretation by the reader; E6 explained: “[Ideology] is supposed to be already contained in the text, but everyone already has an ideology when it is read, isn't it?”.

The other six students (E2, E3, E5, E7, E8 and E11) saw the context as the circumstances surrounding the piece of news. They did not reflect on the importance of understanding the socio-cultural framework more deeply or of playing a role as critical readers. E3 and E7 saw the context as a purely geographical environment in which the piece of news takes place and explained that it is important to know it to “specify where [the characters of the text] are” or “where does it [the facts contained in the text] take place”.

#### *Attitudes towards the difficulties inherent to the assignment*

In last place, the attitudes towards the difficulties inherent to the assignment were different. Four students (E9, E10, E12 and E13) believed that understanding a text in a FL is more difficult because, as non native speakers, they are more worried about disentangling its linguistic code rather than attaining an interpretation that is better placed in the original socio-cultural context (E10: “[In Spanish] you see what the text means before. On the other hand, when you are reading [in English] you

are thinking ‘what does this word mean?’; if you do not understand something, you have to look it up... and you will probably lose part of the meaning”). They know that their difficulties when reading are frequently beyond literal comprehension of the text (E12: “There are some cultural issues and so on that are not literal comprehension... things I would never get”). In addition, E9 and E13 believed that ignoring reading or information consultation that are specific of British culture is a further difficulty to the assignment (E13: “Of course I know more Spanish websites on education to check something I do not know... for example... outstanding. But I do not know very well where to look up A or any other grades in English if I am not looking it up properly”).

Four students (E1, E4, E6 and E11) had an approach of a more limited reading regarding socio-cultural aspects; they believed that the difficulties inherent to the assignment are related to selecting the correct meaning of the lexical units. For example, E1 stated that the biggest problem was “selecting the correct meaning”. Similarly, E11 explained: “I found very difficult to find the... right meaning... that fits the text. You think the one chosen is the right one, but then you see that there are more options”).

On their part, five students (E2, E3, E5, E7 and E8) believed that reading critically is as easy in their mother tongue as it is in English (E5: “Yes... I am used to reading approximately the same in both languages, so...”) and that online reading in English does not have any additional difficulty (E8: “looking up elements in English or Spanish is the same... you can find everything”).

## **Discussion**

We can divide informants into four groups according to their behaviours, strategies and digital critical reading in a FL, as shown in Figure 1. The limits between groups are not abrupt and the figure suggests a *continuum* from the most critical and aware reader (on the

left) to the literal reader with difficulties (on the right). Each group represents an average global assessment of the results stated above on the reading behaviour of the students.

This figure shows the relationships between the three objectives of the study. Those students that identify and interpret the world view that underlies in the piece of news and are able to place it in the original socio-cultural context have a great command of more strategies to

**Figure 1.** Classification of students according to their level of critical comprehension attained and their reading behaviours.

<b>Most critical and aware readers:</b> E9, E12 and E13	<b>Fairly critical readers:</b> E1, E4, E6 and E10	<b>Literal readers:</b> E2, E8 and E11	<b>Readers with difficulties:</b> E3, E5 and E7
Identify the world view of the text, its function and its social, cultural and ideological connotations.	Identify the world view in a general, inaccurate way. Identify and look up some cultural references.	Identify the world view in a general and inaccurate way only with the help of researchers or other students.	Do not identify the text's ideology and do not know what strategies can be used to do so. Problems regarding literal comprehension.
Can identify elements to identify the ideology.	Not able to identify elements to identify the ideology.	Not able to identify any possible elements indicative of the text's ideology.	
Great command of multiple strategies to manage information on the Internet. Inefficient reading behaviours are rare.	Strategies to manage information on the Internet are irregular (some are efficient but others are unknown to them).	Multiple strategies to manage information only to solve difficulties related to their linguistic limitations and to literal interpretation.	Limited range of strategies to manage information on the Internet to solve difficulties related to their linguistic limitations.
Combine the use of online linguistic resources with other multimodal resources and websites with socio-cultural information.	Frequent use of online linguistic resources. Occasional use of Wikipedia and Google Images.	Use of online linguistic resources only.	Very limited range of online linguistic resources.
Think it is essential to know the socio-cultural context in which texts in FLs are placed in depth to understand them.	Think in-depth knowledge on the socio-cultural framework is not important. Look up few cultural references.	See reading in a FL as retrieving the literal sense of the text. Think the socio-cultural framework is not important.	See reading as a mechanical process and the context as a physical environment in which the story of the text takes place.
Be aware of the difficulties inherent to the assignment due to their lack of command of the FL and its culture, as well as of their limitations to use online resources to solve any comprehension problems that may arise.	Believe that reading a digital text in a FL is more difficult because they do not know the meaning and the connotations of many cultural references. Think they do not have a poorer command of online resources to read in a FL.	Think that the main difficulty of the assignment is choosing the correct meaning of each lexical unit to interpret the text properly.	Think the assignment does not have any special difficulties regarding comprehension nor due to the fact it is drawn up in a FL, neither because it is addressed to other culture or because it is a digital text



manage information on the Internet and have a higher level of awareness of the importance of playing a critical role when reading a digital text in a FL, due to the additional difficulties of this process. On the other hand, those students with more difficulties to identify the ideological charge and the meanings culturally placed in a digital text in a FL do not have such a wide range of strategies when searching, finding and evaluating online information and are not aware of the importance of critical reading or of the difficulties of this activity when it is done on the Internet and with texts in a FL either.

Regarding the relationship between the first and the third objective of the study, this research shows that most students of FLs are not aware of the fact that all discourses have an ideological nature and that their meaning is marked by the socio-cultural framework in which it is produced and received, as stated by Murillo (2009). In our study, more than 50% of the students remained aloof to the signs of the text that show a particular world view and are content with a literal, partial comprehension of it. This fact is in line with the traditional view (that characterises didactics, research and collective thinking) of reading as an individual, internal process of linguistic decoding of texts having one only fix meaning, independent of the socio-historical circumstances in which they was generated (Street, 2003). This would explain the difficulties of the students to identify aspects of the text such as its function and its purposes, the author's point of view, the ideological position reflected therein and the discourse and multimodal elements that convey them. It would also explain the imbalance regarding the command of online linguistic resources by the students (dictionaries, translators, style guides) and the documentation resources to solve comprehension problems related to the cultural meanings of the text.

Regarding the second objective, we note that, in general terms, those students who are more aware of the need to play an active, critical role implemented a greater number of strategies to manage online information and they used

them more efficiently. Nevertheless, variability is greater at this point: even those readers with a higher level of critical comprehension have limitations and imbalances in their command of some of these strategies. This fact makes us think that the students did not learn properly those strategies which are necessary to carry out these activities prior to formal education (Martí, 2008) or informally through everyday usage of the Internet (Hargittai, 2002). Their strategies and knowledge have been incorporated in an intuitive, unstructured way through the use of CITs and, therefore, the students have different levels of command when performing different functions. This is reinforced by the fact that during the interviews the students ignore or have difficulties to explain the actions they performed to find, select and evaluate the digital information they need to understand an online text in a FL.

Among those strategies the students had a better command of are anticipating language and searching terms that may produce relevant results, as well as finding relevant information in expository texts in FLs such as those found on Wikipedia. Among the actions that are more difficult are finding, selecting and interpreting relevant information on the list of results obtained thanks to search engines. We believe this is related to the fact that students are familiar with different genres and literacy practices: they know those texts which they worked on repeatedly in the curricula in their MT and FL very well, but they did not study the lists of results obtained when searching information online formally.

We also noted that when it comes to determine what strategies of online reading are to be used to solve their needs for information, the students seem to give priority to certain criteria related to economy (regarding time and actions) to obtain information rather than information accuracy (De Rosa, 2006; Weiler, 2005). This interpretation is in line with Cull (2011), according to whom, "when it comes to university students, especially beginning undergraduates, they are typically content

to make do with simplistic *good enough* information search strategies” and explains some behaviours such as the recurrent *scanning* of the results obtained from search engines (and the few occasions when students click on those results) or the mistakes made by some students when identifying cultural references. Likewise, evaluating the quality of the information and of the plausibility of their own interpretations are functions that are discarded by more than 50% of the students. They trust in their common sense (De Rosa, 2006) and in the reliability of online sources (“Internet”, “Google”, “the dictionary”); they are not able to define proceedings or criteria to value information such as its presence in multiple sources or even the explicit nature of the message’s author.

One last remark falling beyond the initial approach of this research but that we believe it is worth noting and exploring in future research is that regarding the increase of the level of critical comprehension and knowledge on strategies and online resources that students get through group discussions. In the course of the interviews, we identified many processes of collaborative construction of knowledge, both through comments addressed by the researchers and interactions with their mates, which are indicative of the potential of cooperation techniques to develop the ability to understand digital texts in a FL critically.

Regarding the research constraints, the complexity of its design should be noted, since it is derived from the difficulty to study the phenomenon of critical comprehension from empirical data. Its design has different technical (for example, the availability of computers, installing the software, etc.); logistical (arrangement of the interviews) and analytical (since it used recent research techniques that have been rarely developed to date, such as the multimodal analysis of video captures of the informants’ screens) challenges. But it also makes easier the compilation of devices produced by the informants containing observable elements that are indicative of the level of comprehension attained (in the case of translations) and that

enable to observe the action sequence followed while reading (in the case of snapshots). These data, upon triangulation with those obtained from the interviews grant a greater validity to the research. The second constraint of our student is related to the alteration of the natural conditions in which the students performed their literacy practices. Our research took place in a university academic context, which is therefore distant to real practice. Future research should have a more ethnographic approach and analyse critical comprehension online in a FL from text selected by participants themselves and in the contexts in which they usually read those texts.

### Conclusion

This research provides data that are relevant for the teaching and learning of FLs and highlights the need to reconsider and adapt dominant pedagogies to the skills described in different aspects. Language programmes have to make students aware that all discourses are socio-culturally placed and represent a determined world view, even those on the Internet. This task involves teaching students of FLs to consider aspects such as the position taken by the author, the text’s function in its context, the voices and values contained in the text, the selection of linguistic uses included in text and the particular meaning that other semiotic resources of the digital text convey (picture, design, sound, typography, etc.).

Additionally, teaching programmes in a FL must not take for granted the fact the FL students learn to identify comprehension problems and to search, find and evaluate information in an autonomous way on the Internet when performing activities outside formal teaching. On the contrary, they should include these strategies of online information management as a specific learning element and systemise its teaching, adapting it to the changing, specific needs of each group-class.

In last place, this research suggests that the differences between critical, efficient readers and literal readers with difficulties do not only

lie in their competence or linguistic skills, but in the concept of reading itself, its ideological and socio-cultural nature and the awareness of the limitations of foreign readers. Therefore, teaching of FLs should include tasks showing the complexity of critical comprehension enabling students to get a better knowledge on their abilities and difficulties when facing an online text in a FL.

## Notas

1 The title is “Mentoring teenage girls: ‘Watching them develop in confidence is amazing’” and its author is Janet Murray. The text can be visited on <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/sep/02/girls-mentoring-networking>

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