

I can even kite-surf!: Student-Teachers' Engaged in 'Network Learning'

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ICT in Language Teaching. Finding the Right Proportion

E-learning (electronic learning) has become a buzzword in recent years and it has been interpreted in many ways. To some people, e-learning describes *any* application of ICT in learning and teaching, from producing a word-processed handout to a full-blown course on the Web.

I am convinced that nowadays using ICT in various training courses is inevitable; however, we have to find the right proportion between traditional teaching and using ICT.

In my presentation I am going to show through practical examples how I try to create the right balance between the two, and how ICT fits in with established practice in language learning and teaching.

My first contact with computers started in the 1980s when I bought a Commodore 64 for my daughters. We used it for computer games, and at that time I did not think that in a decade or two it would be an indispensable element of my actual work, namely language training. In the eighties when I was in the USA I saw computers as if they were miraculous contraptions, and wondered how in American families even housewives could cope with such 'demonic devices'. I thought that I would never work out how it operates, and followed the mystic processes with suspicion.

However, time dissolved all these fears, and by now word processors and the internet have become an 'indispensable evil' in my life and work.

The break-through of technology in language training

Over the years the language teacher has been confronted with a bewildering array of technological devices.

The appearance of newer and newer technical devices resulted in the spread of new trends in training courses, especially in language teaching. However, as we know the spread of technology is similar to that of fashion trends; the old mode and styles repeatedly come back into fashion. My experience is that we have to be cautious when we use new technology. The lessons I have learnt from this experience are as follows:

- Don't regard technology as a panacea!
- Don't neglect training in using new technologies!
- Don't forget about paper, pens and books!
- Use your imagination and ideas as well!

Over the last decade the advent of the Web has caused revolutionary changes in language teaching. However, besides its positive effects, it brought about a few negative ones as well, especially at the beginning, when the majority of web-based tasks were rather mechanical, and in many cases boring. A common criticism levelled at Web-based teaching and learning materials is that they are uninspiring compared to established materials such as those on videocassettes, audiocassettes or TV broadcasts. During the early days, using the web was rather a passive activity.

However, with the advance of technology and the development of special multimedia packages, the learning process has become more and more interactive. The main advantage of multimedia packages is that the core language skills i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening are combined in a single activity.

Foreign language teaching methodologies have spawned a huge range of different approaches, more than any other subject area. Recently, content-based language teaching has advanced, especially in higher education.

Integrated language and content -based teaching and learning provides opportunities for learners to improve their language knowledge through the study of academic disciplines. This approach is an effective way for both English language learners and learners of other languages to develop both their language skills and academic skills at the same time.

The integration of online activities into the course curriculum "rather than adding these on top of the rest of the classroom activities in a disconnected fashion" is an important point.

Teachers' contributions remain important for coordinating group planning, focusing the learners' attention on linguistic aspects of computer-mediated texts, helping students gain a linguistic awareness of genres and discourses, assisting learners in developing individual learning strategies, and creating an appropriate atmosphere for language learning. To fully exploit these opportunities, the teacher must learn to become a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage".

The guidelines given by Warschauer to using and exploiting ICT - especially the Internet - help teachers implement computer-based activities in the second language classroom.

Whatever reasons teachers have for teaching language via the web, the most important point is to clarify the main **goals** when using the Internet, e.g. to teach writing, revise vocabulary and grammar, prepare projects, etc. It is vital to remember that 'little is usually gained by just adding random online activities into a classroom'.

In his view, the **integration** of online activities into the course curriculum 'rather than adding them to the rest of the classroom activities in a disconnected fashion' is more efficient.

Integrating internet materials in class-work

There are three different approaches concerning the focus of training; teacher-centred, teacher-facilitated and learner-centred.

These principles are valid for teaching internet materials as well.

In teacher-centred classes, the activities and materials are selected and designed by teachers. However, there are also tasks performed individually outside of class at the learners' own pace.

In teacher-facilitated classes a particular topic and a set of goals are determined. Learners have to explore a variety of pre-selected resources and perform some tasks. The outcome of any assignment is clearly defined, but open-ended. This approach may have additional value in enhancing students' language skills.

In learner-centred classes the learners themselves determine the topics, reading materials, and ways of exploring them. Students set the goals, identify web-based resources, and decide on the processes and outcome. In other words, learners are self-directed and autonomous. Examples of possible assignments are mini-projects, presentations, essays, etc. Documentation may comprise a diary, a poster, or a portfolio.

If we want to integrate materials from the web in class-work, the most efficient way is to combine the three and exploit as much as we can from them.

Classroom activities

The transition from "knowing about" to "doing" is perhaps the biggest challenge we all face when it comes to integrating technology into our teaching.

If we manage to combine the benefits of all the three teaching methodologies, then web materials will serve for the benefit of both teachers and learners.

Bax's view (Bax 2003) of Integrated Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) implies a process of *normalisation* that has still not been achieved in language teaching and learning. It is only when ITC is regarded by most teachers and learners in the same way as other everyday technological aids, that ICT will be considered *normal* and no longer regarded with *fear*.

As for my own experience I am gradually building internet materials and tasks into my teaching practices.

ICT is a *normal* way of carrying out a number of tasks that previously we would have approached in a different way.

The web provides a lot of excellent materials for teaching all language skills e.g. reading, writing, listening and speaking. Students need to develop a whole new range of English language literacy skills, which involve emerging forms of communication, reading, and writing using online technologies. In learner-centred collaborative projects, students have the opportunity to work together with their classmates and with others around the world, using a variety of technological means. Effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration, including the effective use of information found in online networks, necessitates a high degree of critical interpretation. Teachers must help students learn to critically interpret information and communication in given social contexts.

In the following I will present some of the practical ideas and on-line resources I use most frequently (reading materials and video clips), especially in content-based courses such as "Media Watch", "EU Issues", and "Business Communication".

Reading

Using the internet is a perfect way to keep up with the latest news, since we have access to various newspapers, broadcasts, and video-materials. Based on overt instruction and critical framing, students can raise their practices to a new level by working towards higher-quality outcomes within particular social contexts, or applying what they have learned in a new social and cultural context.

Online reading serves as the source of input for thousands of readers. Leu (2002) points out that 'the Internet has entered our classrooms faster than books, television, computers, the telephone, or any other technology for information and communication'.

With the increased use of computers comes the increased need to train language learners how to read online.

Using video clips in the classroom

I find video clips especially useful in teaching. I can choose topics adjusted to the course content as well as to the students' interests. Students are exposed to authentic English in a natural context. Not only are they exposed to 'real people', but to real situations, too. Short documentaries, for example, can open up their eyes to different cultures and ways of life. One can really focus on the content, without students losing concentration.

Online videos are short enough to focus on vocabulary: I have the chance to pre-teach relevant vocabulary beforehand, and then whilst watching the video, students will be able to listen to the new vocabulary in context. Language produced from the video can be exploited further by setting up a debate involving the recycling of new vocabulary, and followed up by a piece of writing for homework.

As the length of the video is normally stated on the websites, I can plan classes with a timescale in mind. Lesson planning time is shortened. Short videos provide a perfect way to set off classroom discussion.

There is enough classroom time before or after the showing of the video to exploit the content.

When we view something topical, there is a chance of setting a discussion going by gathering students' opinions on the video. My experience is that talkative classes will carry a discussion through, once you have prompted them with a few questions.

Where the class is hesitant to talk, I give them some preparation time for a discussion by putting them into two groups, where one group will argue advantages, the other disadvantages. This way they have some time to prepare arguments for the class debate which follows. This can be followed up with a piece of writing on the topic for homework, again giving a chance for students to recycle the new vocabulary.

The visual element also stimulates the students. Short videos provide a pleasant alternative to the reading or listening exercises which students are usually exposed to.

However, technical problems can arise, either with problems of internet connection, or in the case of video on demand, a high demand at a given time for one particular video, which can affect the server. High amounts of storage and bandwidth are required for a video to be supplied from a video server located within the network, and high quality is not necessarily guaranteed. If you are not technically acquainted with the equipment, you need to have an emergency back up lesson.

When a longer video is used, attention may drift, especially if we are dealing with a difficult script. This may result in students feeling demotivated as they struggle to keep up with the language. This is particularly applicable to lower level groups.

Some videos can be inappropriate, and the content may not be quite what we expect, hence it is crucial to watch the video beforehand.

Sources of on-line video clips

There are many different on-line resources, the most popular being You Tube. We can go to <http://www.youtube.com> and do a search on the topic we would like to discuss. It is easy to find specific topics and the latest news on video by going to BBC on-line http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/video_and_audio/default.stm

CNN News provides a vast range of videos providing good exposure to US English, and transcripts are available too for some of the programmes. Go to www.CNN.com or, for the transcripts, see www.CNN.com/TRANSCRIPTS/index.html.

When teaching European issues you can go to http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/home/index_en.cfm

BBC on web <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/business/> gives invaluable support to teachers of business English.

Conclusion

So, what kinds of added value can ICT bring to language learning courses in the short and medium term? It is important to bear in mind that the improvements in the ability of ICT to facilitate the creation of rich and productive language learning in the future will affect course design; numbers of face-to-face learners may well diminish, with some activities taking place online instead of in a classroom, because the learning that results is of a higher quality

Course websites are gradually taking over much of the mailing related to course management and administration. Student queries are increasingly sent by email and responded to in the same way. Communication between students and their tutors by email is increasing as more students and staff get online.

The Web provides an opportunity to deliver pre-written and recorded content. Indeed, many courses in a wide range of disciplines already make use of the Web to present course materials to students. Such courses may provide students with lecture notes, power-point presentations, images and graphs, audio and video files, and links to relevant websites and to additional reading materials.

ICT can improve opportunities for students to interact with other students. The most obvious way for students to interact is e-mail. We can set up small groups using group addresses either to enable them to complete a collaborative task, or to discuss a particular topic in advance of an assignment.. Given the conversational nature of much of the dialogue produced in e-mail messages, such online work is likely to bring about improvements in student knowledge and language use not only in terms of their written work, but also in terms of their oral fluency.

So, where is computer assisted language learning heading? Language learners in particular cannot acquire certain skills, for example conversational skills, without face-to-face contact with an experienced teacher. Undoubtedly, there will be an expansion of online learning, but it is more likely to supplement conventional modes of learning than replace them.

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Warschauer, M. (1997). The Internet for English Teaching: Guidelines for Teachers, *TESL Reporter*, 30, 1: 27-33. See also <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Warschauer-Internet.html>

Useful Websites:

http://www.ict4it.org/en/en_mod2-2.htm

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/index.shtml>

http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/home/index_en.cfm

<http://www.youtube.com>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/video_and_audio/default.stm

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/business/>

<https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbxldW5vbWljdHxneDo2NGQwYmJhZTdjZGUxZGY0>

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