



ICT Tools: A Shortcut Between Cultures

Diana Carolina Vera Parra¹, Diana Mayerly Díaz Benavides²

¹Colegio Guillermo León Valencia, ²Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (Colombia)
dianavera00@gmail.com, ddimayediaz17@gmail.com

Abstract

In Colombia the policies for teaching English as a foreign language have been framed in the communicative competence which entails the linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences. These three elements include the “necessary knowledge and skills” that a learner must have to make use of the language. However, in practice we recognize that is necessary to consider the intercultural competence as an intended outcome in which learners have opportunities to deal with language in real situations.

Taking this concern into account, we decided to carry out an exploratory exercise in which we established a relationship with a group of Spanish language learners from a school in the United States and a group of English learners from a public school in Colombia. The main objective of this experience was to offer the Colombian students a context for practicing their acquired skills with the target language bearing in mind that, because of the geographical position of our country, sometimes our students do not find the ultimate sense of learning English.

The experience consisted on using different ICT tools by which the two groups worked together in order to build a friendship and a mutual collaboration in their target language learning. To ensure the efficacy of this exercise, the project was planned including some specific tasks that students were asked to carry out. At the end, students were asked to tell their experience, being able to talk about not only their new foreign friend but also, uncovering the similarities and differences on the cultural aspects found through the exercise.

The socialization of this classroom practice aims to describe the way the project was developed, the participants’ insights and the relationship that emerges between language and culture in an attempt to go beyond the mere linguistic competence, taking advantage of the facilities that ICT tools offer nowadays.

The ministry of education in Colombia is making big efforts to strengthen the English language teaching, pursuing the objective of having citizens who are able to communicate in the language, and looking for opportunities to insert our country in universal processes of communication and cultural opening. Along with this desire, the implementation of ICT tools has got remarkable importance in the educative policies and the government has carried out different strategies to build a closer relationship between Colombian students and technology, providing free internet connection at public institutions and gadgets donation.

Attending to such objectives, teachers are inspired to create pedagogical situations in which we can integrate the subject matter we teach with the use of ICT tools, in order to motivate our students and increase their interest for learning. This becomes relevant at this stage of their lives where there are certain social issues in which learning does not have the importance it should, mainly in low-income students. Consequently, we decided to carry out an exploratory exercise in which one group of seventh graders, from a public Colombian school who are learners of English, had the chance to establish a virtual relationship with a group of learners of Spanish from a school in the state of Colorado in the United States.

This connection was born through an academic platform called “Schoology”, in which teachers from all over the world have the chance to create their own websites, add content, files, grade students, create their own quizzes and, interact with other teachers as in a social network. In one of those interactions, we posted our desire to contact a group to work along with in this project and so, some messages were exchanged and we started working together.

The main objective of this experience was to offer the students a context for practicing their acquired skills by using different ICT tools, through which the two groups would work together in order to build a friendship and a mutual collaboration in their target language learning. Moreover, we felt moved to develop this project thinking on this specific group of Colombian students, who have had very few chances (and most of them none) of using the language with native speakers. Additionally, we were interested in providing opportunities for our learners to discover cultural aspects of the target language and so, exploring the relationship that emerged between language and culture.



1. Initial Theoretical Guidelines

According to Brown (2007), the evolution of approaches in language teaching during the late 1980s and 1990s were characterized by authenticity and real world communication. Alongside the evolution of technology, the internet is the principal medium by which students communicate with others (Padurean, 2009). This has led many to view technology as a tool for communicative interaction (Warner, 2004).

Bearing in mind that the communicative competence involves genuine interaction with the language, technology becomes a powerful tool to facilitate interaction and thus learning conditions (González-Lloret, 2003). There are a number of teaching experiences which involves the use of ICT within the communicative language, and most of them agree that learners can exchange and interact with speakers of a foreign language through a broad variety of spaces offered by the web such as forums, e-mails, networks and blogs.

1.1 Language Learning Via Technology

On one hand, research studies on language and technology argue that ICT provides opportunities for interaction between learners (Padurean, 2009). The same author explains that through online communication people have a better insight into culture. However, we think that to reach this goal, teachers should monitor the interaction, mainly when the participants are very young as the ones in this project.

On the other hand, to teach a language implementing ICT is not an easy task because this can lead to diversification not only in content, contexts and pedagogical methods, but also in teaching environments. To carry out positive experiences with language teaching and ICT, it is necessary that a transformative pedagogy and critical inquiry are present to integrate the technology use with the curriculum content. Montallegzadeh (2005) stresses that the use of ICT requires change in the way teachers think about teaching and their teaching practices and unfortunately, not all teachers are open to these innovations.

2. Pedagogical Proposal

To start the implementation of this project we looked for ways to contact an English native group using the web site www.schoolology.com which we have been using along our teaching practice. One of the tools that this web site offers is that teachers can join groups according to the subject matters they teach. One of the groups there is called "Foreign language teaching" where teachers share materials, ideas, concerns experiences and moreover, they cooperate each other.

We used the "wall" of the group and posted our idea to work with a group in which spanish learners could establish virtual communication with a group of English learners. Some weeks later, two teachers got in contact and things were set to start working with a group from a school in the state of Colorado in the United States. As soon as the contact was established and there were some virtual encounters with the American teacher (using video calls) the students were informed about the intention of the project. At the same time, the principal of the school in Colombia was told about the project and she signed the consent to carry it out.

As our objective to implement this project was to offer opportunities for our students to have contact with real usage of the target language and, at the same time, offering chances to discover cultural aspects the following steps were followed:

- a) The american students were paired up with one or two Colombian students because the Colombian class was larger than the American one. (26 students conformed the American group and 36 students conformed the Colombian class)
- b) The students were asked to write a message via e-mail to their "assigned friend" using the target language.
- c) The topics were chosen by the teachers in order to look for a sharing of cultural elements (the topics were: getting to know each other, my school and my classes, my birthday, my weekend and Christmas)
- d) At the end, the Colombian students were asked to give a speech in the target language about their "American friend", introducing him or her to the class and emphasizing on the cultural differences they had found along the e-mails exchange.



3. Preliminary findings and Conclusions

This project just finished its first stage in which the pedagogical proposal was implemented and the data is ready to turn into a research work. The findings became interesting since the beginning of the implementation. The first aspect that called our attention the most was that our Colombian students show a great interest in using and owning technological devices. Most of the time, teachers have to confiscate cellphones, headphones and even tablets because students use them while teachers are in the middle of lessons at the classrooms. This made us suppose that all our students had a close relationship with a computer and that their skills were optimal in order to carry out the project.

It was a surprise when they were asked to open an e-mail account and send the first e-mail to their "American friend" and see that an important number of students did not find out the way of sending the e-mail. Rather, they wrote the e-mail address on the space where the magnifying glass icon is and so, the sending of the first e-mail was delayed taking into account that all the message exchange took place in the English class and some students did not use extra time to finish this task. Taking this into account, we suspect that our Colombian students just use technology to interact through social networks (mainly Facebook) and play some online games. Therefore, the classroom teacher had to start by clarifying the way to open an e-mail account, send a message and attach files.

Another drawback was that some of the Colombian students use online translators and they do not make the effort of constructing sentences by themselves and this is an obstacle to reach the goal of the project. But fortunately, the advantages are more and these are listed below:

Students' motivation was evident during all the time of the implementation of the project. Since the beginning when they were told about the idea, they showed their excitement to get to know a foreign person. Likewise, the teacher from the United States expressed her amusement to see her students repeating comments like: "this is so cool" or "awesome" every time they opened their e-mail accounts and found a message from Colombia.

Some of the students took the activity very seriously and they started to provide feedback and kindly correct their American friends' mistakes. In the following example, one of the Colombian girls decided to correct some grammar mistakes using a different font color in her e-mail:

"I'm going to correct a few things:

¡Tienes **muchas** preguntas! Yo tengo quince años. yo juego futbol americano. **me** gusta pasar **mucho** tiempo con mis amigos y escuchar musica. Mi **mejor amigo** se llama Joey. Mi musica favorita es Dubstep. tengo un hermano y una hermana. **tambien** tengo dos Perros y dos gatos . No me gusta **la** tarea." (E-mail 1; 10)

In this sense, there is a cooperative work among the participants where everyone benefits of the experience and they start being aware of the need to make mistakes when learning a foreign language.

Finally we can say that this project can be socialized among other teachers in order to be enriched by experts and also to motivate teachers to rethink their teaching practices and reflect on the opportunities that we can provide our learners so they can have contact with their target language in authentic situations and the most important, they can enjoy their learning process.

References

- [1] Brown, D. (2007). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (3 ed.). United States: Pearson.
- [2] Padurean, a. (2009). Foreign language teaching via ICT. *Revista de Informática Sociala*, 97-101.
- [3] Warner, C. N. (2004). It's just a game, right? Types of play in foreign language CMC. *Language Learning & Technology*, 8(2), 69-87.
- [4] González-Lloret, M. (2003). Design task-based CALL to promote interaction. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(1), 86-104. Retrieved October 13, 2003, retrieved from: <http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num1/gonzalez/>
- [5] Montallezbadeh, K. (2005). Technology in teacher education: Developing online teacher education programs. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 6 (1), 171 – 175.