

The effects of ICT on learning/teaching in a foreign language

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Abstract

The world of education in general and that of languages in particular is in constant evolution in order to face up to the upheavals provoked by the era of globalization both at the individual and professional levels. Education has to adapt and renew itself to be compatible with the globalized society. The introduction and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are one of the priorities of the education community in the current digital society.

Indeed, to meet the requirements and the challenges of the globalized world, developing digital practices in the language class has become a necessity. Learning a foreign language and in a foreign language is meant to train citizens of the world open to languages and cultures but not only... To that end, the introduction of ICT in language teaching seems to have become a prerequisite to the modernization of the education system and learning methods.

In this paper, we will first consider the positive effects of ICTs on teaching languages. The second part will be devoted to the presentation of a "language training centre" in an Algerian university where ICTs are an integral part of the teaching practices; this will enable us to assess the impact of new technologies on learning/teaching in a foreign language.

1. Introduction

Even though the introduction of computers and the Internet in Foreign Language Teaching has been a controversial issue, it is nowadays largely agreed that it impacts positively on the learning process.

The way in which Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) was used has witnessed various changes through years in order to answer more specifically language learners' needs.

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) offers a wide range of ICT applications that notably increase learners' motivation, but not exclusively. Moreover, the effective use of the Internet and the Hypermedia brings valuable resources to both teachers and learners.

2. Main advantages of ICT in foreign language teaching/learning

There is no more doubt that the use of ICT has positive effects on foreign language teaching/learning and a large literature is available on the topic; however, its impact is highly dependent on the way it is used, the teachers' motivation and his "savoir-faire". Indeed, technologic equipment and connectivity without human implication is not sufficient to improve teaching and learning; to be considered as an efficient tool, ICT requires an actual engagement of the teacher and a well-defined pedagogic project.

The following impacts seem to be the most obvious ones when using ICT to support foreign language teaching:

- The possibility to adapt easily the teaching materials according to circumstances, learner's needs and response;

- ICT allows to react upon and enables the use of recent/daily news, it offers access to authentic materials on the web;
- A quick feedback is made possible;
- Possibility to combine/use alternately (basic) skills (text and images, audio and video clip...);
- Lectures become more interesting and less ordinary which boosts learners' engagement;
- ICT enables to focus on one specific aspect of the lesson (pronunciation, vocabulary...).

In spite of contrasts that may exist in terms of educational environment, there is significant evidence of the benefits and advantages that the use of ICT can have on learners. The effective use of ICT impacts on learners and various aspects of the learning process as follows:

- ICT increases learners' motivation and thus enhances personal commitment and engagement;
- ICT improves independent learning;
- Learners' collaboration and communication are more important;
- Learners' attainment and outcomes are improved.

As mentioned previously, the effects of ICT depend on the way it is used; the key-word being "effectiveness", the main question remains "how can ICT be used effectively to support foreign language teaching/learning and improve learning in a foreign language?"

3. The multimedia language centre

In Algerian universities the language of instruction for learners who study scientific, technologic and medical subjects is French, that is to say the first foreign language in Algeria. Yet from the very first grade all educational content instruction is given in Modern Standard Arabic, the official language. It means that after studying during twelve years in Arabic, learners have to attend – and understand – courses in a foreign language. Obviously, this specific linguistic situation is problematic for a large majority of students who face difficulties in learning in a foreign language.

Research indicates that learning an additional language takes time to develop language fluency necessary for developing cognitive conceptual knowledge. Studies have shown that learning a second/foreign language for academic use may take many years.

The acknowledgement of the high rate of failure in the fields previously mentioned, mainly first year university students, led the Ministry of Higher Education to develop, four years ago, language centres. The main goal of such a process was to enhance students' language skills to raise their attainment and increase their performance in their specific fields of study.

Djilali Liabes University of Sidi Bel Abbes has been equipped with a multimedia language centre primarily devoted to answer the huge demand from students to help them increase their competence in French.

3.1 Management

A written and a listening test, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), are given to learners who enrol in the multimedia language centre so as to organize homogeneous groups according to the scores.

Learners are divided in small-scale groups (no more than fifteen students) that allow a better learner-learner and learner-teacher communication as well as an independent learning.

There are as many computers in the room as learners, a round table stands in the middle of the room and may be used each time the teacher feels it necessary, depending on the task to be fulfilled.

The textbook is always the starting-point for the session that is carefully organized and divided in well-determined phases by the teacher. Generally speaking, the lecture begins with the observation/presentation of a picture in the textbook then activities that deal with the four skills derive from this paper-based document. Of course, not the whole session is dependent on ICT; however, the main activities and tasks are supported by the computer, the Internet, audio tools, podcasts and so on.

ICT enables the use of a wide range of authentic materials that answer the students' needs; in that specific case, scientific-oriented materials are required to allow at the same time the development of the linguistic competence and the ability to learn in a foreign language.

The goal of the language teacher is to make learners acquire sufficient mastery of the language that enables them to understand their lectures (listening comprehension), to assimilate information and finally to use the required linguistic abilities to analyse and synthesise them.

Of course, managing a multimedia-language centre requires not only a deep human involvement but also technical support since teachers make use of:

- Audio and video recordings/editing tools
- Software packages
- The Internet
- Virtual worlds
- Data-show

Not the least important is the preparation of the courses that is time-consuming and quite demanding on the part of the teacher. A well-prepared session in the multimedia language centre presupposes:

- A careful and precise planning/timing of the session;
- A meticulous choice of software;
- An adequate design, adaptation and chronology of the activities;
- The availability of other tasks in case learners do not react as planned.

It also implies physical capacities since teachers intervene with individual learners and move from one computer to the other when not explaining activities to the whole class.

4. Impacts of ICT on students learning in a foreign language

Positive effects of the multimedia language centre (MLC), and thus the use of ICT, were acknowledged with learners studying sciences and medicine in French.

All the materials used to plan lectures were scientific-oriented to answer learners' needs and create a realistic environment that corresponds to their actual learning context and that is conducive to language learning.

Even students who were originally sceptical so as the beneficial impacts of the MLC, notice actual improvement most notably in terms of listening and writing skills, i.e. the target skills.

There was evidence of significant benefits for learners to use ICT:

- Students develop better listening skills due to regular exposure to audio materials (audio and video recordings –authentic and software-, podcasts, pronunciation software...);
- Selection of updated articles from the Internet contributes to learners' awareness of the language (grammar skills, coherence in committing ideas, syntax...) and of the specific scientific editing/presentation (scientific texts, reports...);
- Teachers reported on their learners being engaged, motivated and attentive;

- ICT impacted positively on students' proficiency. A majority of students got better scores in their fields after attending language courses at the MLC;
- Students increased their ability to take notes effectively; i.e., they were more likely to listen to the teacher and grasp the message, select the appropriate information and take notes that will be further exploited;
- The enhancement of linguistic competence combined with motivation and challenge led to more autonomy and initiative (to do research on the Web, to propose links, to use online dictionaries and encyclopaedias...).

The prime goal of the learners who attended the courses was to develop linguistic competence in order to crush the linguistic barrier that makes them fail their examinations. Students still need to develop more accurate competences, strategies and methodology to benefit more from their acquisitions. Nevertheless, ICT certainly brings an appropriate answer to those students whose studies are endangered by linguistic limitations.

5. Conclusion

There has been a plethora of studies and reports to show evidence - or lack of evidence - of ICT positive effects on learning a foreign language. An interactive environment such as the MLC offers almost unlimited potentials but requires an efficient and effective management with available technical support, connectivity, hardware and software.

Unfortunately, staff lacks training and the budget granted for maintaining the language centre is far from sufficient. In spite of some administrative rigidity and thanks to teachers' collaboration, the MLC proposes programmes adapted to learners studying in a foreign language. Teachers share curricula and create their own data bank with references, links and materials to facilitate the access to resources.

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