Shaking the Brick and Mortar:
Traditional versus Online Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Among the many negative aspects of the pandemic-driven 2020, probably the most rampant has affected education worldwide. Schools everywhere have experienced a dramatic shift away from the traditional wall-enclosed classroom into the virtual space hosted by digital learning platforms. In this context, information and communication technologies (ICT) have forged a well-established role in education. Students nowadays have to develop a new set of skills and sub-skills, whose practice and reinforcement depend, to a great extent, on digital literacy, communication abilities and critical thinking. Military students are no exception and foreign language teaching in the military academies has constantly adapted to modern educational tendencies and challenges. ICT facilitate and enhance the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that go into the construction of the modern officer's linguistic profile and role in international professional environments. This paper aims to explore military students' perceptions towards using ICT in learning a foreign language, by applying a targeted questionnaire specifically focused on foreign language learning methods, skills to be acquired with the help of ICT and attitudes towards using educational technologies. As a conclusion, the article emphasizes the notion that ICT continue to exploit significant avenues for instruction, especially in the field of foreign language learning.

Keywords: *information and communication technologies, foreign language learning, military students, modern education, questionnaire*

1. Introduction

One of the most impactful ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, in most of the countries around the world. The concept of schooling has drastically changed, and instruction moved outside the traditional classroom environment and into virtual domains, more or less adapted to accommodate the flux of information and the requirements for specific knowledge and skills in such short notice.

In this context, information and communication technologies (ICT) have found an increasingly significant role in the process of teaching and learning alike. Their efficiency can be objectively measured based on the end state of the act of education, i.e. the acquisition, development, and improvement of profession-specific abilities, in the fields of instruction where ICT are used prevalently.

2. ICT – a modern support in education

2.1. Definition

Information and communication technology refers to all technical means, employed to manage information and facilitate communication. More specifically, it includes computer and network hardware, as well as the complementary software. In 2012, Asabere and Enguah provided a complex definition of ICT which, from their perspective incorporate all the tools, processes, equipments and facilities that assure the physical infrastructure and the services that enable the generation, transmission, processing, storing, and disseminating of information in a variety of forms (voice, text, data, graphics, video). [1] Livingstone (2012) narrows the use of ICT to educational environments, including specific technologies such as DVD players, interactive whiteboards, data projectors, all of which are aimed at creating, managing and disseminating information in the classroom. [2]

2.2. Benefits of ICT in English language learning and teaching

Foreign language learning has always benefitted from the use of digital technology, as a means of creating learning opportunities in differentiated and individualized contexts. Aspects specific to the implementation of ICT in didactic activities pertain to theoretical, methodological and praxiological preoccupations in the field. Cakici argues that "The implementation of ICT into real language context is

more critical today than ever before since its growing power and capabilities are triggering a change in language learning environment." [3]

While the traditional methods of teaching the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) still remain important for language teachers, the use of ICT enables the modification of teaching and learning strategies in order to create a more students-centred learning environment. [4] According to Altun (2015), computer, internet, smart boards, cell phones, video games are used in the language learning process to raise students' motivation and language awareness. [5] The implementation of ICT generates content variation, flexibility of contexts, and innovation opportunities in terms of pedagogical methods. Integrated technology in the foreign language classroom reduces learning anxiety and encourages students to take risks in practicing the target language in an environment that is closer to their "digital natives" profile. [6]

During the period of quarantine, ICT have become an essential instrument in providing education at all levels. Against this backdrop and given the restrictions that forced instruction out of the traditional classroom, distance learning grew increasingly dependent on e-learning platforms. "Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy of Sibiu (NBLFA), Romania, is using Moodle, a digital educational platform that provides all the necessary functions for organizing and conducting distance learning for the cadets. The platform has successfully allowed the continuation of the teaching and learning process while home, and has enabled students and faculty to remain in touch both synchronously and asynchronously. Through Moodle, professors and instructors were able to provide students with a wide variety of educational resources (live lectures, materials with bibliography and working tasks), while students used the platform to access the suggested resources and submit their work for verification.

3. Methodology

3.1. Aim and objectives of the study

The overall aim of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the way NBLFA cadets experience and perceive the use of ICT in learning foreign languages in the newly created virtual environment imposed by online education. We aimed to demonstrate that ICT's role is to facilitate and enhance the absorption of knowledge and skills that go in the construction of the modern officer's linguistic profile, tailored to cope with the challenges of international professional environments.

By and large, the present study aimed to identify the importance, role and efficiency of computers and online resources in facilitating the acquisition and development of foreign language skills and to analyze the different ways in which ICT determine positive outcomes of the learning process.

3.2. Research method

In order to accomplish the proposed objectives of this study, the working method is informed by the use of the survey as an investigation tool, which relies heavily on the application of a questionnaire, whose answers have been analyzed, interpreted and discussed in the last section of the article. The interpretation of the obtained results underlies the conclusion that ICT are an important element of instruction and contributes greatly to the acquisition of foreign languages, while ensuring the consolidation of language-related skills, and, to some extent, the expected level of performance.

3.3. Sampling

The participants in the survey are a representative sample of 30% of the cadets from the NBLFA, enrolled in the Military Leadership study programme, belonging to all three years of study and different military specialties and branches (infantry, mountain troops, reconnaissance, paratroopers). In turn, the target respondents belonging to the Military Leadership program represent 30% of the total number of LFA students. The sample has subsequently been partitioned according to gender (50% male students and 50% female students) in order to keep an unbiased approach in terms of sample population gender.

Due to the current pandemic situation, the questionnaire was administered online. The students were open to answering the questions and highly motivated to share their experiences and contribute to the survey.

3.4. Results and discussion

After the questionnaire has been administered, the obtained answers were collected and the results were discussed specifically for each item separately. The interpretation of the answers draws together

the outcomes of the survey and unifies the responses under a coherent conclusion meant to explain the role of ICT in the process of language learning.

The underlying premise that the survey has started from is that all the NBLFA cadets have received a laptop from the institution as part of their training resources package. Thus, the somewhat logical question of access to technology has an implicit affirmative answer. However, access to internet might represent a problem, naturally generated by the area of residence (rural versus urban), which does raise certain issues as far as internet reach is concerned.

Consequently, the first question asked targeted the residence of the respondents, as we considered it relevant to differentiate between urban and rural environments in terms of access to internet. The distribution of the sample structure by residence is illustrated in Figure 1.
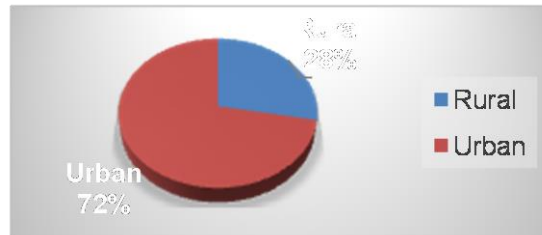

Fig. 1. Sample structure by residence

It was satisfactory to discover that more than 2/3 of the respondents dwell in urban areas, which means that they have easy unrestricted access to internet. As a result, this has a major impact on the students' learning opportunities of using ICT for distant education.

Another question, open only for those who chose "rural" as their residence, prompted respondents to expand on how easy it is for them to get access to internet in the areas where they live. On a scale ranging from *1 – impossible, 2 – somewhat easy, 3 – very easy*, 56% of the students from rural environments positioned themselves in the *somewhat easy* area, 38% in the *very easy* range and only a small percentage of 6% at the extreme end of *impossible* (Fig. 2).
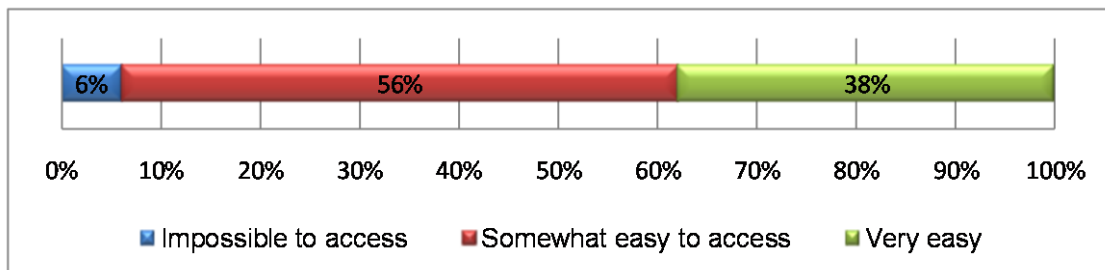

Fig. 2. Access to internet in rural areas

The ratio of the respondents with easy access to internet in rural areas demonstrate that there is a significant decrease of the discrepancies between the technical possibilities that used to typify the rural environment in comparison to the urban one, where all students have internet access. This indicates that ICT are easily accessible by almost all cadets, which means that the objective necessary prerequisites for their active involvement in the teaching-learning process are met.

The following question referred to the amount of time military students spend using the computer. Figure 3 provides a visualization of the answers.
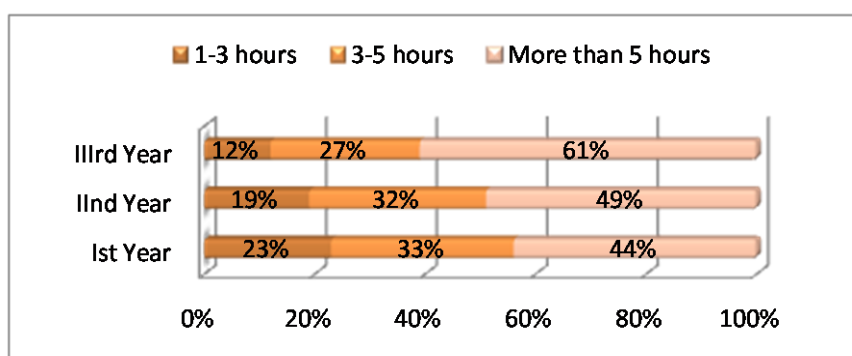

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Fig. 3. Time spent using the computer

We can notice an increase proportionally correlated to the year of study, which indicates that, as they advance in their academic career, military students become more dependent on ICT. It is a consequence of the fact that their learning becomes progressively autonomous, especially towards the end of their study cycle (3rd year), when most of the academic tasks are based on individual study and research.

The next question, related to the amount of time generally spent in front of the computer, narrowed down the experiences of the cadets to using computers to study or do research in a foreign language (English, French, German or other languages). The answers to the question *In what language do you access online resources?* demonstrate that, regardless of the study year, most of the research or learning/training conducted online is done in English (Figure 4).
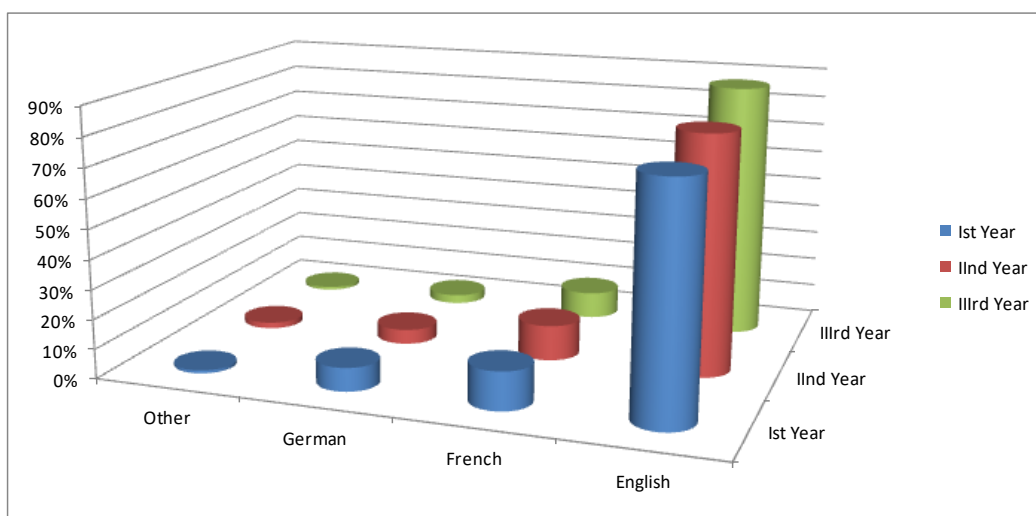

Fig. 4. Language used when accessing online resources

Again, English is the language of choice among students regardless of the year of study, but the interpretation of the answers also shows the popularity of the other NATO language – French – which cadets study at the Academy, alongside with German. It can be concluded that, irrespective of the type of information they may have to retrieve or study using ICT, cadets access it in a foreign language, which definitely contributes to a great extent to their linguistic improvement, albeit in an indirect manner.

This question was a good springboard for channeling the survey towards the topic of foreign language learning, with specific questions related to the attitudes and opinions of the cadets in what regards their experience with learning a foreign language by using the ICT. For example, the item *Using ICT in foreign language learning has a beneficial impact on me because…* targets attitudes and opinion by prompting students to identify reasons in support of the statement that using ICT in foreign language learning is beneficial. The variables offered as pre-defined answers to this question are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Variables of item no. 5 in the questionnaire

Variables	*No*	*A little*	*So and so*	*Much*	*Very much*
a. I focus more on learning.					
b. I feel more independent when I study.					
c. I have a better understand of the information/content.					
d. I remember information/content easier.					
e. ICT helps me collaborate better with other students in solving the assigned tasks.					

Figure 5 illustrates the variation of answers we received to this question, calculated by year of study and as a global score at the level of the entire study programme.
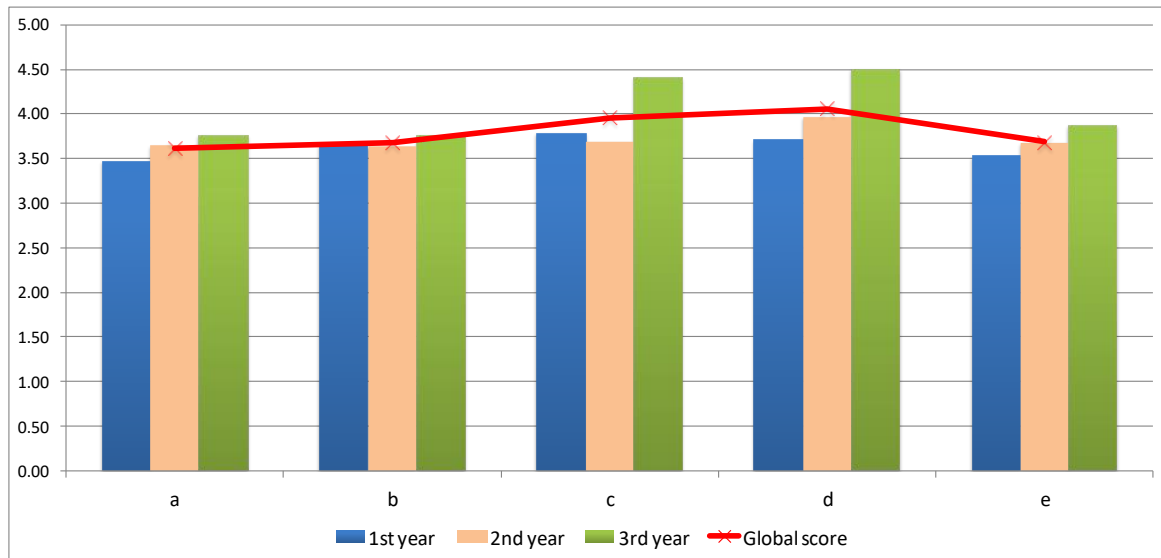
Fig. 5 - Item 5 scores

By correlating the information in Table 1 with the graph presented in Figure 5, we discover a total score of 3.80 at the level of the Military Leadership programme, with level per year of study increasing by 0.08 from the 1st to the 2nd year, by 0.35 from the 2nd year to the 3rd, and by 0.43 between the 1st and the 3rd year. These upward tendency shows that the positive perception of military students on the five variables listed in Table 1 increases as students progress in their academic journey, especially in the last year of study, which, in turn, demonstrates that the influence of ICT on the cadets' linguistic performance is also substantiated by the benefits they consider information technology has on their learning: it helps them stay more focused, gain autonomy, grasp a better understanding of the knowledge. The only downsize of ICT that was identified relates to the limited opportunities of collaboration when solving tasks, as students might feel they need live interaction in order to accomplish different cooperative activities. This, however, does not come as a surprise, as the military is inherently an organization that is based on cooperation and relies heavily on direct interaction between its members.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the analysis of the cadets' views regarding the use of ICT in foreign language learning has indicated a positive attitude towards technology and the benefits it entails. The computer, the internet, mobile phones, and other means used to foster foreign language learning provide a flexible and diverse set of technological tools while enhancing students' motivation, encouraging active and autonomous learning through research and self-study, facilitating language awareness and creating a comfortable working environment. Despite the undisputed success of traditional methods, online learning is increasingly becoming an educational reality teachers and students should adhere to.

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