



ICTs for English Teaching in Military Context in the Foreign Languages Center (FLC) of the Albanian Armed Forces Academy (AAFA)

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Abstract

Learning English nowadays has become a 'must' for military people, especially for those who participate in NATO staffs, multinational missions, joint exercises or attend different NATO training activities.

It is obvious that ICTs and their use have facilitated language teaching and learning in military context. Major changes have been made in the curricula, teaching methods and teaching materials due to implementation of ICTs in English teaching process in Foreign Languages Center (FLC) of the Albanian Armed Forces Academy (AAFA). However, ICTs, with their rapid development, offer new challenges. Hence, teachers need to be always updated with the progress in ICTs step by step and modernize teaching through a better use of ICTs. In the era of internet and P2P communication networks, yesterday's teaching methods and materials become old so fast that no one would believe. ICTs offer a wide range of teaching materials that teachers can use in their daily teaching process.

This paper focuses on these aspects of English teaching, based on the experience of FLC teachers in using ICTs. Questions that it tries to answer are: How is the curriculum of English language teaching impacted by ICTs? What is the impact of ICTs on teaching methods? How are ICTs used to prepare fresh teaching materials?

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century teaching has undergone a drastic change. The traditional teacher-centered pedagogy belongs to the past and every day becomes obsolete being replaced by the more learner-centered methods. ICTs are one of the responsible generators for such a great progress.

Language teaching/learning process is a very important part of the AAFA activity. Being the official NATO language, English is undoubtedly a priority. The intended curriculum for English language education in FLC since 2005 is STANAG 6001 Descriptor. Implemented curriculum is its reflection in that it details Descriptor's requirements in teaching programs, in daily lesson plans, in teaching materials and in teaching methods. This kind of curriculum is in constant change due to many factors among which the progress and impact of ICTs.

2. Literature review

The era of development of ICTs coincided with the stage when the 'communicative competence' was gaining ground in the Applied Linguistics. Foreign language education for its own features considered ICTs as a close ally in the path of profound changes that theories of 'language competence' required in foreign language education. These theories led the Council of Europe to develop a syllabus for learners based on notional-functional concepts of language use. Curricula of language education, textbooks, teachers' perceptions, attitudes and daily work, teachers and learners' roles, teaching materials and teaching environment changed with the coming of ICTs age in education.

Since the beginning of this close relationship between ICTs and language teaching and learning different authors like Cuban [4], Gergel & Masbit [6], Kerr [14], Jager & Lokman [13] etc. began to focus their research on it and on its outcomes.

However, it should be underlined that the number of scholars engaged in research on the impact of ICTs on language education increased mainly after 2000. The entire corpus of research is classified in different ways. Rampersad [20] thinks "...there are two groups of studies:

- a) Quantitative
- b) Qualitative



Considering Hismanoglu's [10] classification and the research after him the studies conducted to date may be grouped as follows:

- a) Those that deal with ICTs in Language Instruction (Peetenai 2001; Harrison 2002; ; Belkada and Okamoto 2004, Koehler et al. 2004) [11], Drent & Meelissen [5], Gray et al [8], Kilimci [16] etc.
- b) Studies which cover attitudes and beliefs towards the use of ICTs in language teaching (Becker and Riel 2000, Mumtaz 2000, Myers and Halpin 2002, Isleem 2003, Van Braak, Tondeur and Valcke 2004, Huang and Liaw 2005 , Bullock [10]), Acikalin 2009 [1], Alexandra Tuvér and Elin Blomqvist 2009 [21] etc. c) Research on Curriculum Innovation and ICTs Integration (Kirk and Macdonald 2001, Koh 2002, Alev 2003, Blázquez 2003 (in Maria del Mar Camacho Martí 2006) [18], Burnett et al. 2007 [3] and Greene 2013 [9]. A great contribution in this area is UNESCO's publication in 2005 "Integrating ICTs into the Curriculum: Analytical Catalogue of Key Publications" which describes in details the strategies on how to integrate ICT successfully into education [21].
- c) Finally studies dealing with materials development. Among them are: Larsen-Freeman, 2011 [17], Başal 2012 [2], Mozafari & Wray 2015 [19] etc.

3. How is the curriculum of English language teaching in FLC impacted by ICTs?

Since 2005 FLC is working with the new intended curriculum i.e. STANAG 6001 Descriptor. This curriculum is based on communicative competence, so the way it is designed and its requirements make the use of ICT a necessity.

Hymes 1972 proposed a list of "...communicative competences as a fundamental prerequisite for success in both professional and personal aspects of life. It is comprised of four different sub-competencies: linguistic; sociolinguistic; discourse and strategic" [11]. These sub-competences are reflected in STANAG 6001 Descriptor for every language proficiency level and skill.

The English courses conducted in FLC are on-site training, which intertwines the class work with the independent work of the learners. Therefore, in the implemented curriculum the focus is to detail the intended curriculum into teaching activities which increasingly include the use of ICTs. The teaching programs are revised every academic year and one of the main purposes is to integrate the use of ICTs more intensely. For instance, the reviewed programs for the 2014-2015 academic year included more ICT based activities. Since the very beginning of the revising work the working groups for each level were advised to keep in mind the inclusion of ICTs in the programs in order to: Support learner-centered and self-directed learning; produce a creative learning environment; assist learners in accessing digital information efficiently and effectively; promote collaborative learning in a distance-learning environment; offer more opportunities to develop critical (higher-order) thinking skills; improve teaching and learning quality and; support teaching by facilitating access to course content.

The use of ICTs has turned into an organic part of teaching programs which guide the daily work of teachers and learners in and out of class. Components of ICT like digital media, Internet and wireless means of communication are topic related in teaching programs and are mandatory to the teachers.

4. What is the impact of ICTs on teaching methods?

The era of advanced ICTs brought about a shift in teaching methods and teachers' role. Fullan 2007 underscored that: "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think". [7] As above mentioned, FLC adopted the new curriculum in 2005. One of the first steps made for its implementation was teachers' training to increase their ICT literacy because as some authors have stated "...a language teacher is not any more the 'primary source of information'. In this new age he/she is the actor who 'creates structure and provides advice for students, monitors their progress, assesses their accomplishments and works as a coach" [15]. With the assistance of Peacekeeping English Project (PEP) the whole teaching staff was trained on site to acquire the necessary ICT literacy and some teaching techniques based on ICTs. During these training sessions facilitators focused on: How to organize video activities, how to retrieve materials from Internet and simplify them for the appropriate level of learners, how to prepare teaching materials using ICTs, how to stimulate them use Self Access Center (SAC) etc. At the same time PEP equipped FLC with different ICT devices.



However, transformation of teaching methods from teacher centered to student centered was a process that could not be enthroned successfully by the use of a 'magic stick'. During this process a number of influencing factors, both "non-manipulative and manipulative" [20] were encountered. This was not a linear process. It was also vertical and improvement was made step by step. Nowadays the on-site teacher training, regularly organized in FLC, focuses on how to use active teaching methods and techniques where the use of ICTs is the pillar. The role of the teacher, due to this major change, especially in levels 3/2/3/2 and 3/3/3/3 is that of a facilitator. If at the beginning of this process some teachers used ICTs as a 'decorator' of the lesson, nowadays the situation is different. Teachers think ahead of the activities they are going to construct based on ICT and how to integrate these activities with the topic planned in the teaching programs. The use of a certain media like BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, NATO audios, VOA etc. intends not only to listen to an authentic language source to get information on a certain topic related to the teaching program, but also to plan an activity on it, which might be speaking, writing, or listening. The same can be said for the use of Internet, YouTube, Google etc. Some of the teaching methods that involve ICTs are briefings, discussions, listening, group work, pair work, combination of on line work at home with off line work in class, writing essays, descriptions, reports based on an ICT component etc. Teachers are also thinking of how to introduce social media and 3G or 4G technologies in the teaching process. In a nutshell, teaching methods and techniques have been greatly enriched in FLC thanks to the use of ICTs.

5. How is ICT used to prepare fresh teaching materials?

The use of ICT in language teaching ruined the barriers of traditional pedagogy. Willing or not teachers cannot avoid the use of ICT. The question is how much and how to use it. ICTs first of all are very effective teaching means if teachers and learners use them in the right way. Secondly, ICTs are a great source for the design of teaching materials.

In FLC teachers make use of both functions of ICTs. The ICT components available are used for teaching benefits according to the teaching programs. In addition, the material development team has created separate files for each language skill with materials and exercises designed for the use of ICTs. These files contain different links that learners can use independently out of class. They are also used by teachers to get prepared for the lessons. Every time a helpful link is found by one of the teachers it is added to the list. Thus, the record of links is refreshed and updated. Based on the teaching programs the teachers have created their individual portfolios with ICT based materials, especially for the English classes of supplementary materials. Every English teacher in FLC has created files with teaching materials for each language skill. Most of these materials are downloaded from Internet or are prepared having Internet materials as a reference. Books like "Improve your listening" or "Keys for writing" written by FLC teachers as supplementary materials for learners in listening and writing skill are ICT based work.

6. Conclusion

ICTs use has had its own influence on the curriculum, teaching methods and teaching materials in FLC. They created a new teaching and learning environment that enhances active language learning. However, there is still a lot to improve in order to integrate technology in our teaching. ICTs are having an unprecedented progress so the teachers have to keep abreast with this progress. ICTs require a refocused approach to teaching which will propel us a long way to making technology and the internet a more rewarding partner in the teaching and learning process.

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