The Computer and its Role in the English Language Teaching and Learning Processes

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Abstract

The following short paper shows some aspects and important features about technology, focused mainly on the use of the computer, and its role in the processes of teaching and learning a foreign language. It is necessary to consider that the term 'technology' is too broad and it refers not only to ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) but also with some other devices and mechanisms such as: videoconference, teleconference, tape recorder, television, VCR, video camera, mobile phone, etc. This short writing is focused on the use of the computer as a technological tool for enhancing the teaching and learning processes. Also, it includes a brief critique about ICTs and CALL and some questions or concerns about the use of the computer.

"If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow".
Dewey

Key words: computer, CALL, ICTs, teaching, learning, education.

Resumen

El siguiente documento plantea algunos aspectos y características importantes acerca de la tecnología; se centra, principalmente, en el uso de la computadora y su papel en los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Es necesario considerar que el término "tecnología" es demasiado amplio y que hace referencia no sólo a las TIC (Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación) y CALL (Aprendizaje de Idiomas Asistido por Computador), sino que también está relacionado con otros dispositivos y mecanismos, tales como: la videoconferencia, la teleconferencia, la grabadora, la televisión, el video, la cámara de video, el teléfono móvil, entre otros. Este artículo se centra en el uso de la computadora como una herramienta tecnológica para mejorar la enseñanza y los procesos de aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero. Asimismo, se incluye una breve crítica sobre las TIC y CALL y algunas preguntas o preocupaciones sobre el uso de la computadora.

Palabras clave: computador, CALL, TIC, enseñanza, aprendizaje, educación.

In this time of educational reforms teachers are constantly forced to look for new and innovative methods that address the mandates of the government, the president of the institution, students, school board, administrators, parents, etc. As a result, the pressure lies upon finding technologies and methods that deliver efficient tools that provide data to monitor students' progress effectively.

The computer is seen as another tool we use to teach our students. It improves our teaching by providing exciting materials to use to reinforce what we are teaching. It enhances student learning by providing different ways for students to explore.

It is another tool which helps us address different learning styles in our classrooms. Let's say that the computer literally brings the world to us. Our students are no longer limited because of their geographic location. Through using the Internet our students have access to information they would have never seen or knew existed before.

Before students enter their first classroom, many have already been using a computer for a year or more. This generation of children born into the digital age is often referred to as the 'Net Generation'. And while the World Wide Web is just a kid itself (not even 10 years old), it has already had a significant impact on the pupils we teach. Students today are technologically smart, they demonstrate their skills more quickly, and they are getting better throughout the cyberspace.

On the contrary, most teachers in the classroom today grew up without computers in their homes, schools, or even at the universities. As a result, many are rejecting to work with the technological innovations that have made their way into the classroom. In addition to acquiring new technological skills, teachers also must decide how to best implement these new teaching tools into the curriculum.

One of the most important components of the computer is the Web. It is responsible for enormous changes in the way students search and build information. The Web is, by nature, an interactive medium, which responds to the instructions given by the user.

To effectively teach the 'Net Generation', teachers should reflect on how the Internet and hypermedia technology (the ability to link a word, a sound or a picture to another set of information) has changed the way students respond to and look for information. Hypermedia allows the user to quickly and easily jump from one 'chunk' of information to another, putting together bits and pieces like a puzzle.

Barbara Hudgins (2001) stated some relevant features we can consider when using the computer with our students, and they are:

- The digital revolution requires that teachers be both familiar and comfortable with a wide range of CD-ROM and Internet technologies.
- Plan, plan, plan! Structure your lessons so that there are multiple hypermedia resources for students to access.

- Be flexible–understand that self-directed learning requires you to allow students to build their learning experience. Careful planning of lessons and media will allow you the increased confidence to do this.

- Hone your navigation and researching skills and then teach your students to do the same.

- Help students learn to assess the validity and reliability of Internet sources.

- Encourage students to create multimedia projects to demonstrate that learning objectives have been met.

On the other hand, I want to pose some considerations about the use of the computer through ICTs and CALL approaches:

ICTs and CALL: Five Considerations to Point Out

The first one has to do with the market expansion for establishing information economies – Internet technology is very expensive and the countries need to get benefit from further expansion and the big infrastructures belong to the already developed countries. This aspect is reinforced by the ever-changing nature of technology and the need for constant investment.

The second one has to do with a hierarchy of access. This is a characteristic of elitist technologies that exclude poor countries that cannot afford the high entry costs and who are then faced with high marginal costs and are left behind. Those who can pay to access to the information and communication world and those who can't. Internet users are faced with a similar hierarchy, between those with no access at one end and those with the very fastest and always on connections who can see constant opportunities.

The third aspect is related with replacing workers with machines. The automation is an inseparable feature of ICTs technologies and the intention of automation is job elimination. And while it is not entirely clear whether ICTs will be a net creator or destroyer of jobs, it is clear that the jobs created will be in selective areas. ICTs also create two trends in employment: Working at a Distance, which reduces labor direct relationship, and often excludes workers from traditional social security structures; and Managing at a Distance, which involves simultaneous selective decentralization and centralization. ICTs use will be based on management criteria not labor criteria.

The fourth aspect has to do with the unexplored impacts on physical and mental health. The effect of sitting in front of a computer screen all day and being exposed to so many more sources of radiation are unknown. Even more disturbing thing is the increasing amount of software applications to support thought and productive work, many people can not write without a word processor, the computer is an integral part of the thinking process. Furthermore, with the promise of virtual reality around the corner, what will become of imaginative thinking and highly symbolic thought? The push to place computers in every school has also led to the sacrifice of many other important elements of the educational system.

The last aspect I keep in mind is that the computer is an interactive idiot box. Early proponents of the TV claimed that it would revolutionize education and learning, but yet it has become known universally as the idiot box and is a source of societal stuff. The controllers of TV turned it into a marketing medium, and the same is happening for the Internet. This, combined with fantasy (war movies with news reports of real wars), has contributed to increase ignorance. The interactivity of the Internet is also suspect, it has to go beyond of a "click/no click" response.

Besides this, and taking into account one of my colleagues' deep point of view, it is necessary

to analyze and reflect about some concerns from different experts on these topics:

> Until quite recently, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was a topic of relevance mostly to those with a special interest in that area. Recently, though, computers have become so widespread in schools and homes and their uses have expanded so dramatically that the majority of language teachers must now begin to think about the implications of computers for language learning.

As pointed out by Garrett (1991), "the use of the computer does not constitute a method". Rather, it is a "medium in which a variety of methods, approaches, and pedagogical philosophies may be implemented" (p. 75). "The effectiveness of CALL cannot reside in the medium itself but only in how it is put to use" (Warschauer, 1998).

Questions or concerns to be analyzed when using technology

Finally, and starting from my own experience working with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) approaches, I would like to pose the following questions and concerns to be analyzed on a later paper:

- Why and how are ICTs being used in education? Are they integrated into the system or simply added extras?
- How are they being used in teaching and learning processes?
- Given the high costs and shrinking resources in education, are ICTs a wise investment?
- What investment is being made in teachers and other roles necessary to support ICTs applications?
- Are ICTs being used to bridge or widen gaps or are they creating new ones?

As a conclusion, I have to state that New Technologies –New Media, Net Generation, Electronic Era–, or whatever you want to call it- require that teachers rethink much of what they do, from their role in the classroom to the way they present information and assess their students. The good news is that there are many useful resources on the Internet and on CD-ROM multimedia materials that can help teachers incorporate aspects of new technology in a successful way. It is important that both teachers and students have a benefit from creating a Net-friendly or a Technological classroom. Learning will become more interactive for students and in this way they can empower their language learning process.

I can also say that the seductive powers of the Internet have been taking the best minds away from the most pressing challenges of our time: persistent poverty, disintegration of societies from globalization, and ecological degradation. While these critical issues are happening, some of the brightest youth occupy their time with programming languages, hacking, and online gaming. The Internet is a very expensive diversion from the most pressing problems.

Likewise, ICTs need to be used for more than simply reproducing learning by rote. Paying attention to issues such as human resource development and considering the full range of technological devices will ensure that ICTs and CALL become real tools for education development.

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