

Foreign Language Teaching in the Net Generation – An Analytical Examination of Contemporary Studies and Attitudes

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Abstract

The ever-increasing role of Internet tools in everyday life is undeniable in our information society. Their impact has been especially significant in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT). Are virtual environments conducive to the development of foreign language competences among EFL students? The present study has the double aim of raising the awareness of the relevant actors with regards to the potential of IT as a powerful means of enhancing the effectiveness of FLT and of determining the right balance needed for a harmonious integration of IT with more traditional methods and techniques in the teaching process. We attempt to give an answer to such questions as: “Is digital technology needed in FLT? Does the value of using IT depend on the context?” The answers given are grounded on the well-supported pronouncements of the contemporary literature dealing with the subject and on data that have an institutional backing reflecting the experience of some advanced countries. Further on a presentation of the opinions and practice of the high-school teachers of foreign languages in Korca, collected through a questionnaire, will be followed by a critical assessment of the results, together with suggestions on how teachers can avoid some of the pitfalls that attend the application of IT in a foreign language class. A synthesis of the dimensions opened up by the integration of IT in the teaching process will conclude this research, highlighting its importance as a means of relating the language classroom to the modern world.

Keywords: Information Technology (IT), pedagogical tool, integration, technophobia, authentic material, distance learning.

Introduction

In our daily experience and professional routine we hear more and more often expressions such as ‘we live in the Net Generation’, ‘challenges of the information society’, ‘welcome to the digital epoch’, etc., that, to the ear of both scholars and common people, do not sound like metaphors anymore, but represent a living reality throughout the globe.

The Internet technology has hardly left any sector of modern life untouched. The teaching field as well is facing the challenges of IT tool implementation. In this new context, the demand for the application of IT in Second Language Teaching presents a lot of complex issues that need a solution.¹

Within this framework, this research intends to analyze and assess the role of IT in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) in order to determine a necessary balance for the integration of IT as a pedagogical tool in the FLT process measuring all possible advantages and disadvantages of it in comparison with the traditional FLT methods.

Furthermore, this study aims at raising the social conscience of actors – trainers, teachers, learners, education policy-makers of the potential of ICT and the limitless options it offers to increase the efficiency of foreign language learning.

On a larger scale, this analytical research is meant to contribute to the major goal of intercultural global education perceiving Internet technology in FLT as an enhancer of the harmonious development of learners’ and teachers’ identity and personality in a dynamic multilingual multicultural social context to promote citizens’ cohabitation in a complex information society.

¹ For a more detailed presentation of the technology evolution through decades in FLT see Remi A. van Compernelle and Lawrence Williams, “(Re)situating the Role(s) of New Technologies in World-Language Teaching and Learning”, in *Second Language Teaching and Learning in the Net Generation*, edited by Raquel Oxford and Jeffrey Oxford, Honolulu, National Foreign Language Resource Center, 2009, p. 11.

1. A critical examination of ICT role in FLT by recent studies

Contemporary studies on this topic emphasize three major trends that are promoted by the implementation of ICT as a powerful communication tool in FLT as described below:

1.1. Intercultural communication

"The cornerstone of sociocultural/sociocognitive approaches to computer-assisted language learning research and practice is the capacity of technology to serve as a means of facilitating human interaction and communication."¹ Ever since networked technologies became increasingly popularized in the 1990-s, they have helped connect people to information emphasizing people-to-people links. The Internet has expanded the potential for interactive participation through various forms of social networking, (co)authoring, publishing, etc.

But no matter how entertaining such programs may be, or how large their capacity is in mediating intercultural communication, the exploration of the limitless online universe might pose great difficulties to both language teachers and students, who should not merely be familiar with this technology, but also be able to conceive the complicated sociocultural context where it takes place/occurs in order to relieve possible cultural tensions during the teaching process.

In the same research, Steve Thorne supports the view that despite the same functioning of internet technology across different cultures, variations have been identified in their '*cultures-of-use*'² - a term which depicts the manner how technology is used and perceived in various social contexts. Such phenomena occur primarily due to different perspectives of estimating the study of foreign language across cultures, secondly, as a result of the diversity of previous experiences of electronic communication, complicating the intercultural communication mediated by the Internet.

1.2. Sociolinguistic and pragmatic development

A lot of researchers regard communication through technology as a promoter and developer of the sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic features of discourse. More specifically, the free use of 'real information' by students compared to the data offered by the foreign language textbook raises their awareness of the existence of informal language varieties and registers traditionally absent from their text materials. Thus, the number of options of Internet technology-mediated discourse at students' disposal increases significantly. Moreover, learners can be involved in constant and prolonged communication with native speakers. During this type of communication learners also develop their sociopragmatic competence, an example of which are the cases of correct formal and informal addressing forms among second language learners and native speaker peers. Such '*linguistic exchanges*' create a context in which the social consequences of wrong usages enable learners to perceive the respective social meanings of the corresponding form of address.

1.3. Online communication and linguistic accuracy

Beyond developing sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic competence, the new technology promotes linguistic accuracy, a product usually regarded by learners as the main aim of education in a foreign language. From a sociocultural point of view, this dimension has gained a new meaning, which mainly refers to learners' participation in communicative exchanges using online tools. During such sessions native speakers, who provide peer assistance, together with second language learners remark on each-other's language uses, comment on, analyze and evaluate their own language product, etc, which certainly contributes to the improvement of formal linguistic accuracy among foreign language students.

According to recent studies, the use of *Learner Corpus Analysis* (which consists of focusing students' attention on their own errors) is seen as fruitful in enhancing learners' concentration upon their extensive and accurate language

¹ Richard Kern and Mark Warschauer, "Introduction: Theory and practice of network-based language teaching", in *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice*, edited by Richard Kern and Mark Warschauer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 1-19.

² Steve Thorne, "Artifacts and cultures-of-use in intercultural communication", *Language Learning and Technology*, 7(2), p. 38-67.
<http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num2/thorne/default.html>

development. Furthermore, the study of Paige Daniel Ware and Robert O'Dowd¹ observed the impact of peer feedback on language development among American learners of Spanish and Spanish learners of English. The survey indicated that all students experienced positive feelings about the corrective feedback from the native e-peer. This finding has broad implications for the further development of linguistic accuracy during collaboration online.

Further arguments and estimates concerning the ever-increasing attention to ICT in FLT come from the American Foreign Service Institute, who advocate the fact that Second Language Acquisition is both an intensive and time-consuming activity. This institute, after years of experience in training field agents, estimates that the FLA at a high level of fluency needs from 700 to 1300 hours of instruction, which means that four years of language study at university do not suffice to achieve functional proficiency.² Still, for those students who started studying a foreign language at high school and continued it at university, the situation is not bright at all, since, first of all, plenty of work done at university level simply revises the knowledge acquired at high school, in addition, high levels of language proficiency need not less than 4-6 years of full instruction depending on the range and nature of the linguistic material obtained.

Another concern of FLA researchers and teachers goes to the inefficiency of the learning process due to poor insufficient information. They believe the language learning process can be made efficient only by raising contacts with the target language. Following this perspective, going to the region where the target language is spoken, 'plunging' in its cultural and social reality is certainly the most favorite but also most expensive option. (Statistics show that less than 3% of students in the world study abroad on academic programs.³) In such a context, FLA theorists believe in the limitless capacities of IT in fostering learners' contacts with FL, which, if used wisely, could well replace the necessity to study abroad. The fact whether ICT fulfils this mission or not, depends on the way it is integrated in the FL curriculum.

The ways how IT tools are used must be governed by a specific theoretical model. In the net generation significant support has been given to the so-called *interactionist model* of FLA (a theory strongly supported by Pica, Kanagy and Falodun)⁴, which relies on the principle that SL is best learned through social interaction emphasizing possible errors during learners' efforts to communicate and comprehend each-other's meanings in the social learning environment. The nature of ICT tools is heterogeneous, meaning that different tools have different benefits. The most ideal and popular one nowadays is the Internet – the icon of IT, which gives students access to authentic materials in the target language or offers them the possibility to virtually travel to the region where the language is spoken only by a mouse click.

This sense of authenticity is further evident since the Internet provides an outlet for everybody to raise one's voice, promote one's self-image and legitimize one's goals. Robert J. Blake, in a recent study, strongly advocates Internet advantages when he identifies IT as a text-based medium that amplifies students' attention to linguistic form, a stimulus for FL production, a safe and nonthreatening form for SL discussions, especially for women and minorities, an expanded access channel with possibilities for creating global learning networks.⁵ Meanwhile, scientific research shows that network exchanges help learners enroll more often in the communicative learning process, experience more pleasure and become more self-confident rather than similar students in traditional FL classes.

The same resource indicates that 84% of teenagers today – the college learners of tomorrow use the Internet primarily as a tool for communication through instant and text messaging.⁶ This shows that such an activity is both a familiar and a favorite tool for them.

From a practical perspective, the American Department of Education observes a few educational benefits of IT extending use in FLT. As figures denote, there has been reported an ever-increasing enrollment pressure (with 25% from 1990-2004) in public schools, they tend to face an additional increase with 15% within a few years.⁷ The high flux of students

¹ Paige Daniel Ware and Robert O'Dowd, "Peer feedback on language form in telecollaboration", *Language Learning and Technology*, 12(1), p. 43-63. <http://llt.msu.edu/vol12num1/wareodowd/default.html>

² More detailed figures by the American Foreign Service Institute are quoted in Robert J.Blake, *Brave New Digital Classroom – Technology and Foreign Language Learning*, Washington D.C., George Town University Press, 2008, p. 1-2.

³ *ibid*, p.2.

⁴ T. Pica, R. Kanagy and J. Falodun, "Choosing and using communication tasks for second language instruction, in *Tasks and language learning: Integrating theory and practice*, edited by G. Crookes dhe S. M. Gass, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1993, p. 11.

⁵ Robert J. Blake, *Brave New Digital Classroom*, p. 4.

⁶ *ibid*, p. 5.

⁷ The abovementioned data are quoted in Robert J.Blake, *Brave New Digital Classroom*, p. 5-8.

complicates the normal functioning of school institutions (class teaching), thus, in the future FL instruction is expected to take place at a distance, which will offer a reasonable solution to the majority of language learners who can't have a seat in the language real classroom (even though class experience won't be diminished).

According to the same department, in higher levels of education, especially professors of literature express a serious complaint regarding their language programs, which are too weak to prepare students to read the original, meanwhile reading them in translation does nothing to further students' FL proficiency.

On the other hand, especially for less-known foreign languages, another curricular problem appears – the need for qualitative pedagogical materials at all levels of proficiency, which remains unsolved due to low commercial profit margins at the publishing houses, asked to produce very limited copies of print materials. Technology can serve as a solution in this case by creating and offering online materials to students at all levels responding to their needs.

Finally, other data indicate that most institutions of higher education are affected by a prevalent student trend to gravitate toward courses that deal with either culture or language rather than literature¹. But such departments can recapture students' interest by integrating technology capacities in FL culture courses supplementing and enriching them with art and literature knowledge available in the form of web materials.

A lot of studies² highlight the constant fear of many people in general and teachers in particular from ICT due to the insufficient information they have about it. With the increasing presence of the Internet the term '*technophobe*' has appeared to describe this category of teachers, a lot of whom have had successful careers with students. It is believed that they misconceive the role and place of technology considering it a methodology detached from the language learning process, and, as such, it is immediately refused. Others hold an incorrect view as if the technology of today is all we need to know, as if it is sufficient for us to face tomorrow's challenges. The fact that technology changes day by day creates another barrier to other teachers, who complain they won't be able to keep up with such rapid and sudden changes. While some others fear the "nightmare" that tomorrow's technology will replace teachers' work. These 'phobias' keep teachers away from technological innovations and from recognizing the benefits of using IT in class.

2. A case study with foreign language teachers in the district of Korça

Following our methodological approach to base the arguments about the use of technology in Albanian schools on a firm empirical basis a survey was carried out in 2012 with 16 foreign language teachers in the high schools of Korça district aiming to examine their attitudes, difficulties and future expectations regarding the possible integration of Internet tools in FLT. The method of collecting the data was through a questionnaire completion (available in the appendix). After closely reflecting upon teachers' comments and concerns, a few recommendations for future work have been made. (A thorough analysis of the questionnaire results, with regard to all issues appearing in it, will be the focus of a new specific article related with the contemporary profile of foreign language teachers facing IT challenges.)

3. A synthetic discussion of teachers' attitudes to IT in FLT

At this stage, it is crucial to examine teachers' attitudes to IT in FLT, since they have a more immediate and concrete perspective on it. It is important not to raise unrealistic expectations regarding the possible contribution of technology in the foreign language curriculum, because, what is encountered in teachers' circles often contradicts theoretical research and statistics. For truth's sake, teachers generally distrust the new technology and are unwilling to learn more about its application and benefits in the FLT process. Why does this happen and do teachers have the right to hold such views?

The results of our questionnaire show that only a small number of teachers result to have expressed promising attitudes, while the majority's attitudes converge with what we have quoted from the resources. Here are the most frequent complaints of the foreign language teachers asked in our survey:

1. I have never had a single English class in the computer room, because the school director has programmed it for the subject of Computer Science only. (18%)
2. I haven't been trained about technology. (82% of the teachers questioned)

¹ *ibid*, p. 7.

² *ibid*, p. 8-14.

3. I am afraid that I know less than my students and there is a terrible embarrassment when it comes to using IT in class. (22%)
4. Our coursebook materials are excellent, let's use them, I see no space for ICT in teaching French. (18%)
5. Technology makes me feel uncomfortable in class, that's why I don't even imagine using it with learners. (22%)
6. Preparing materials for a class with technology takes plenty of time. You can't do it very often. We have to teach 5 classes each day, it's impossible. (65%)
7. How can I possibly use technology as I have to teach in classes with approximately 40 teenage students? (80%)
8. There is a basic need for infrastructural investment in our schools. (42%)

Certainly, such attitudes are real especially in the Albanian society at this time of transition and need to be considered. But there is something basic that these teachers still lack, that would make a big difference – it is the unclear information they have about technology as a socially inevitable supporter helping to increase contacts in the foreign language and culture. We are of the opinion that it is high time our society overcame this barrier if we really want to move forward with the rest of the world. With the good intention to help people become conscious of ICT advantages and encourage teachers to get started with simple technology tools in class, we are trying to respond to the abovementioned concerns expressed in the questionnaire offering some reflective practical solution.

With regard to the first problem, we suggest that teachers' staff must negotiate and plan the use of computer room well in advance to leave scope to all teachers and subjects to design lessons/projects when they need to.

As far as the second complaint is concerned, it is very frequently heard by teachers, but, as a matter of fact, everybody knows how to use the email or the Internet and this knowledge is enough to get started with technology in the classroom.

The third remark is often true for teachers who may have received no instruction in the use of technology. However, having learners in the class who know more about technology than teachers do is something profitable, because teachers can rely on this group of students for help and support, encouraging and motivating such learners to exhibit their skills and knowledge in this area.

In response to the fourth issue, the use of technology in class does not replace using traditional materials (the board, the coursebook), rather, technology tools are used to complement and foster classroom work following the textbook topics of discussion, e.g.: the topic on sources of energy can be supplemented with various online technology-mediated activities, such as: projects, forums discussion, etc.

Fear from technology is often expressed by teachers who have had negative experiences with technology in the past, therefore, the best way to address the situation is to make them aware that they already possess some technical skills by using technology in their own lives, and encourage them to get started by applying simple tools. Their engagement in training workshops or online courses would certainly lead to technology acceptance in the long term. Technical problems with technology are rather frequent and something normal, that is why teachers should always be prepared to come to class with a second teaching plan, to avoid class failure in case of technical setbacks.

Collaboration and discussions among teachers at school and in forums as well as the use of technology resources provided by most coursebooks nowadays are necessary in helping teachers create additional materials more easily.

Finally, a suggestion can be given to those teachers who teach overloaded classes – to divide the class in two, ask one group to work on the computer as the other group does some written task, and then swap activities.

4. Advantages and disadvantages of IT in teaching foreign languages

The following is a summing up of what we consider to be some of the major advantages and disadvantages of using IT in teaching foreign languages:¹

¹ The advantages and disadvantages of the Internet technology in SLT have widely been treated by a great number of researchers. Among various works on this topic, special interest pose the articles of M. Warschauer (see Mark Warschauer, "Computer-mediated collaborative learning: Theory and practice", *Modern Language Journal*, Cambridge, Vol. 81(3), 1997, p. 470-481; also see, M. Warschauer and D. Healy, *Computers and language learning: an overview*, Language Teaching, Cambridge 31, 1998, p. 57-71.

1. The integration of IT in the teaching process provides the teachers and students with a wide range of authentic materials that they can use in class. Such reference sources as online dictionaries, translation programs and encyclopedias are of great help in the process of teaching reading skills. The Internet can be used to provide free of charge access to newspapers, magazines reviews and all sorts of materials that can be of use in the language classroom.
2. The Internet can be used as a most valuable communication network. The advantages that the global network of communication brings to the foreign language classroom as a great opportunity for interaction among students or between students and teachers are almost too obvious to mention.
3. IT provides students with various means and techniques for the development of language skills. Special programs can be downloaded for the improvement of speaking, reading, and writing skills. Using IT as a means of teaching a foreign language enhances the students' communication abilities by situating them in a real communication environment where they can exchange messages with one-another in the language they are studying.
4. The internet has made possible a radically new approach to acquiring a foreign language: teaching/learning at a distance. The value of learning at a distance for those students who can't afford to study abroad and thus gain a first-hand knowledge of the language and culture they are exploring cannot be overestimated.
5. Technology can be used to bring us into a more immediate contact with the culture of the people whose language we are studying. As the learning of a foreign language is a complex socio-cultural phenomenon getting to know better the culture of the native speakers of the language is a great help to the learning process.
6. The Internet can be a great motivation for the achievement of learning objectives. It has been proved that the students who use the Internet with a learning objective are more active and productive than those who don't.

Together with the advantages we should not overlook some of the obstacles that attend the use of IT when teaching a foreign language.

1. Having a free and unlimited access to the Internet is not a matter to be taken for granted in countries like Albania where considerations of a financial character do not allow maximum efficiency in its use by teachers and students (installing the Internet in schools or training teachers on how to make the best use of it in class can be quite costly).
2. Sometimes navigating the net with the purpose of finding what you need for the lesson can be a frustrating experience for a number of reasons, ranging from the inability to read and comprehend what is on the screen to being overwhelmed by an overabundance of information which the teacher or student finds it difficult to swift through.
3. Technical problems, such as the slowing down of the net, can have a very negative impact on the achievement of the objectives planned for the lesson.
4. The extensive use of IT in teaching a language entails a paradigmatic shift in the way the teaching process is conducted and the respective roles that teachers and students assume. In the new environment provided by IT the teacher is no longer a final authority on knowledge but rather a guide and a facilitator of the learning process. The students, on their part, assume greater responsibility by becoming more active and autonomous. These radical changes in the way the whole network of relationships in a foreign language class is conceived can be confusing and unsettling for traditionally minded teachers used to the old teaching/learning stereotypes.

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, we should assert that with all the obstacles and difficulties involved, the advantages that the use of IT brings to the teaching of foreign languages are too important to ignore its use in the classroom. The challenge is, first, to find the right balance between the new IT based methods of teaching and the traditional ones by integrating into a coherent whole the best things that each approach has to offer. Second, to make it possible for both teachers and students to fulfill the new roles demanded by this new learning environment - the teachers should prepare themselves for a continuous course of technical and professional training, while the students can benefit from technology only if the activities that it is used to serve are congenial to their interests and needs.

The use of ICT as a communication tool provides opportunities and challenges for FLT. These challenges require a more accurate and argument-based perception of ICT role in this process. Considering this approach, we regard technology not as an isolated phenomenon detached from the foreign language teaching practices (this would be nonsense and would have serious consequences upon language learning), but as a pedagogical tool the value of which is determined by the

application of it in response to the concrete pedagogical class objectives. As such, we believe that technology must not be separated from the rest of the classroom, since it forms a crucial part of a broader cohesive multidimensional approach to FLT.

This is what Helena Meyer, teacher of English and specialist trainer for the teaching of foreign languages, says about the use of IT in the foreign language classroom:¹

'Yes, technology is here to stay -- nobody can deny this. Our kids... breathe it, eat with it, sleep with it... And blind resistance will take us nowhere. On the other hand, uncritical adoption of technology just because it's fashionable might lead to unprincipled teaching -- which, in my opinion, is the greatest sin of all...'

As a teacher, I try to use the technology I have available, in a balanced way, but if I'm teaching in a situation where technology is not part of the resources I have, I go back to the 'old ways', with no loss of quality...

As a trainer, I come across teachers who have already jumped in the band-wagon, and won't teach a single class without a fancy technological device. And also deal with those who say: "I'm a good teacher and have done without it all my life, so why bother to change?" To both, I encourage a review of beliefs, and, as you well mentioned, to think about sound pedagogical reasons for using (or not) technology...'

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¹ Helena Meyer, in response to Pete Sharma "Controversies in using technology in language teaching", April 8 2009. <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/controversies-using-technology-language-teaching>