ICT in Language Learning: Benefits and Methodological Implications

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ABSTRACT

ICT as a teaching medium is gaining popularity. In this post, we want to offer some aspects of using ICT that have benefited and stimulated both students and teachers. We discuss our experiences using the Blackboard e-learning environment for teaching language classes in English and Swedish (at various levels), learning terminology, and ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Our focus will be on how the web-based environment may facilitate student-centered learning by improving student motivation, individualization, and cooperation in creating study materials while developing a sense of "us" and belonging. Looking at our past and current courses, we will see how we may motivate students by including them in creating learning resources such as databases on specialized study themes, PowerPoint presentations, and online dictionaries. We examine how ICT solutions can be used to support various classroom activities, group work, and pair work assignments; for independent work; for enforcing student-centered learning and individualization principles; and for forming one's personal opinion and being able to express it on current issues.

Keywords: e-learning, ICT, language learning, individualization, motivation

Introduction

Disagreements are common in e-learning. Some educators value its benefits, while others are wary of the possibility of the electronic environment "overtaking the classroom."

Our experience with adopting e-learning to supplement face-to-face classes has been excellent and stimulating for students and teachers. At the same time, our university has provided a substantial incentive to encourage professors to investigate the possibilities of online learning. For example, the University of Tartu began organizing e-learning sessions named "Coffee with e-learning" a few years ago. This was inspired by a Scandinavian model. The e-lunches, which were held during the lunch break of the last working day of the week and served enticing delicacies with coffee, provided cutting-edge knowledge about e-learning. The IT-support employees, who also served as tutors to the teaching staff during the development and implementation of the e-courses, taught the ICT solutions.

Consequently, all distance learning courses and 30% of full-time courses at the University of Tartu shall have web-based support by 2010 (http://www.ut.ee/590864). Nowadays, 34% of courses have some materials available on an electronic system that is not linked to the Internet (IS). The EU-funded initiatives "VANKeR" and "Best" are supporting the project. The educational and tutoring support available in language teaching can be utilized to create e-learning environments for teaching general language courses in multiple languages at various levels, acquiring terminology, and using ESP (English for Special Purposes) in multiple fields of expertise. Simultaneously, ICT

helps us promote student-centered learning, individualization, and the development of a sense of community. We want to share some of these experiences in the article below.

The theoretical background

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    1. *Student Motivation and E-learning*

ICT promotes contemporary learning and language acquisition principles. Individualization, engagement, and student motivation are all necessary parts of the ICT process. As Theobald (2006: 1) points out, confident kids require extrinsic motivational tools. Nonetheless, "the ultimate goal of educators for their students" is intrinsic motivation (ibid.). How can we motivate students to do this? Finding significance in what students do is typically attributed to intrinsic motivation. According to Theobald (2006), "helping students find value in learning through the implementation of various instructional strategies and multiple alternative and authentic forms of assessment while maintaining high standards of student performance in an environment that encourages students to do their best work with effective, nurturing teachers will help increase the motivational levels of all students." L2 (second or foreign language) motivation is defined by Dörnyei and Otto (1998:65) as follows: Motivation, in general, can be defined as a person's dynamically changing cumulative arousal that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes by which initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized, and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out.

Hasanbegovic (2005) examined a study by Martens et al. (2004) on the impact of intrinsic motivation on e-learning in authentic computer tasks. According to the survey, intrinsically motivated students achieve more in a fixed time period as a result of their increased effort and persistence and will do different things in computer systems that allow for this liberty of choice (Hasanbegovic 2005).

A well-balanced ITC environment will allow students to feel the above and remain motivated throughout the learning process. Motivation, individualization, learning in context, and learner activation are all buzzwords in modern education that are frequently part and parcel of good ICT support.

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    1. *Modern role sharing: learner responsibility and teachers' roles*

Learner responsibility—the pupils' ability to envisage and pursue their goals—is also critical. A modern student, particularly at the university level, must understand why and what they need to study, as well as be able to construct and adhere to a personal study plan. Wilson (1981: 61) observes that student development during the university years might be seen as follows: One school of thought holds that pupil development proceeds through a regular succession of stages or levels, with each step implying a restructuring and reorganization of what came before. In terms of how an individual thinks, feels, and behaves, 'higher' stages are fundamentally different from 'lower' ones. Another critical viewpoint holds that student growth should be viewed in terms of mastery of a set of developmental 'tasks' that entail the individual's maturation in various aspects of cognition, emotions, and social interactions.

Today, the teacher's function is that of an advisor, an expert in the subject whose job it is to support the student's progress. This is far more imaginative and difficult than the more standard "design and control the learning process" concepts. According to Dörnyei (2001: 35), teachers are excellent motivators and socializers. As the legally appointed leaders in the classroom, they express collective conscience, signify the group's cohesiveness and identity, and serve as an example, reference, or standard. They also serve as an 'emotional amplifier' for the group, whose pleas and illustrations are crucial for energizing the group.

Put, to lead means to direct, energize, or motivate. Increased cooperation and disregarding formerly hard borderlines are becoming increasingly widespread practices in education as well as elsewhere. According to Day and Sachs (2004: 7), the essence of democratic professionalism is an emphasis on

collaborative, cooperative activity between teachers and other educational partners.

Kiggins and Cambourne (2007: 368–379) underline the necessity of "triadic collaboration" (ibid., 374) from the beginning of young teacher training. Kiggins and Cambourne (ibid.) emphasize: "Trust becomes an essential factor in the knowledge building process, and if friendship and trust are not present among the student cohort, this process is unlikely to occur."

At the same time, the duties associated with the teaching profession as a whole grow. According to Day and Sachs (2004: 7): "It suggests that the teacher has a broader responsibility than the single classroom and includes contributing to the school, the system, other students, the larger community, and the collective responsibilities of teachers themselves as a group and the broader profession."

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1. *Learning concepts in situated meanings: the possibilities for ICT*

J. P. Gee (2009: 15) emphasizes the significance of learning concepts with situational meanings. Learning occurs only when pupils have absorbed and tried out the contents of images in circumstances that teach and test their true purpose. Without it, children may be able to complete seemingly excellent "pen and paper" assessments. Yet, further testing reveals that they are unable to solve real-world situations (cf. Gardner 1991, in Gee 2009: 15).

ICT and web-based learning solutions provide learners with opportunities to make the learning experience more entertaining and challenging. Several of the capabilities here are appealing and enthralling, even similar to what has been mentioned as the educational reserve of video games. According to J. P. Gee (2009), the concepts that they adhere to are frequently related to the ideals of supporting active learning. We correlate ICT with the following capabilities that Gee associates with positive learning processes in video games (Gee 2009: 22): interactivity, adaptability, a progressive increase in difficulty, and adhering to the "cycle of expertise" principle.

Furthermore, the medium's modernity and analogies to advances in nearly every other domain of human life, where the digital revolution spans from citizen journalism to museum pedagogy (cf. Gottlieb 2009: 26–37), contribute to its attractiveness.

A recent SRI International report for the Department of Education in Estonia (http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf) demonstrates that learning outcomes achieved through ICT solutions are more profound than learning outcomes achieved through traditional learning methods: Students who learned online outperformed those who received face-to-face instruction on average. Over a 12-year period, the report discovered 99 studies that included quantitative comparisons of online and classroom performance for the same courses. The analysis for the Department of Education found that students taking some or all of the course online would rank in the 59th percentile in measured performance, compared to the average classroom student scoring in the 50th percentile.

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    1. Creating online dictionaries

Our experience suggests that online dictionaries are most helpful in learning ESP and creating terminology. This was especially conspicuous in the case of teaching aviation English. In this discipline, we only established vocabulary in Estonian for a few years, as aviation education in our language was eliminated in the 1940s and was restored only in 1993 with the creation of Tartu Aviation College. Terminology was developed in the lectures and workshops of the main field of study, sometimes also accompanied by finding the counterparts to items of English vocabulary in the English language lessons, with active cooperation with students. The online dictionaries served as a term bank built by students in the field, accessible to the whole student community from the moment each respective student added their vocabulary item to the online environment.

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    1. Power-point presentations

PowerPoint presentations, for example, have proven to be quite popular with students. When given in the classroom, the PowerPoint presentations are archived on the internet and allow students to revisit the presentations they like the best, review the new vocabulary items presented in the PowerPoint reports, and revise new knowledge on areas of interest to them.

3.1.3 Extension of Activities in the Classroom

Activities developed to supplement classroom activities aid in the acquisition of vocabulary, the construction of one's personal opinion, and the capacity to articulate it on current events. It allows students to comprehend their field of concentration and many other critical topics in a broader framework, putting them in a context that extends beyond their university, country, and continent. Another critical component is the ability to rapidly shape the learning materials to match the needs of the pupils. It may be useful to include a grammar or vocabulary exercise in an area or topic that requires active learning or revision. Allowing students to participate in the process of establishing and shaping the study process keeps them interested and motivated.

- 1. *Web-based solutions integrated with classroom learning*

Web-based solutions also provide excellent opportunities for doing eye-to-eye instruction in the computer classroom. The ICT solutions can be utilized as a supplement to various classroom activities, such as group work and pair work assignments, but also for follow-up independent work on classroom activities for students with a particular learning style or as preparatory work. In each of these cases, the goal is to promote student-centered learning and individualization principles (different interests, levels, and needs). E-learning as a supplement to classroom learning allows us to make the study process more flexible and better meet the needs of various students. Students are involved and "part of the process."

  - 1. Multimedia possibilities

For example, the Web-based environment can offer a variety of multimedia options for improving speaking skills. It can be accomplished in a variety of ways. One of our students' favorites has been the jig-saw pair-work activities, which involve: watching different video clips; answering different questions to both students that become, in essence, a short summary of the clip they have seen; and finally, after replaying the respective videos with one's partner with the voice on mute, the respective student in charge of a certain video provides a voice-over.

If you find an informative and engaging video clip on a topic you are working on with advanced students or an ESP group, this activity can provide students with the most up-to-date information, buzzwords, and key expressions on the topic while also posing a substantial challenge.

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  - 1. Finding and sharing background information through the Web

Another popular task is locating extra information on the books, phenomena, or people mentioned in our articles or student presentations. We frequently construct this as a group work activity. And, unlike in traditional classroom settings, where feedback material from buzz groups is retained in our memory or on paper boards, the ICT learning environment allows students to view their final feedback placed there later during the course, wherever they are—at home or in Hawaii. Furthermore, the current licenses allow us to keep the courses online for participants for at least half a year following the course, providing ideal opportunities for a longitudinal learning process and revisiting the materials after the formal conclusion of the learning cycle. This possibility, combined with the attention of students from parallel groups and "future generations," is quite motivating and even motivates them to have an unofficial friendly rivalry over whose report or PowerPoint presentation looks the best.

The benefits of using e-learning as a support for classroom teaching

- 1. *E-learning as a support for classroom teaching*

ICT as a support for ordinary classroom teaching, and as a part of it, has the obvious benefits of easy access whenever and wherever you wish it

dematerialization (less paper – more trees), enabling us to use modern methodologies and individualization (different interests/ levels/ needs)

Contacts beyond our university, state, continent ("broadening the horizons"; "real English", or whatever foreign language for that matter)

Students have an overview of topical issues, their context, and their background

easy access for quickly (!) Finding inspiration for continuing the conversation and developing the skills to find the right information, analyze it, present it, and discuss it developing skills for using the e-environment and new technologies developing responsibility for the learning process forming one's own opinion

learning to (dare to) express it

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1. *The ethical dimension: learning to have a say*

According to a Chinese saying, "Teachers open the door, but you must enter on your own." It is our responsibility to motivate students. But, a good language lesson should provide pupils with more than just new vocabulary. It is critical to recognize the fact that the rapidity with which information and news reach our children (through this new language) allows them to be informed about and influence their opinions on significant problems relating to our society and the "here and now."

Many notable sociologists and scholars (for example, Cronin 2002, Pym 2005) have underlined that having an opinion is not enough; an educated person must share it in order to affect the society we live in. Indeed, much of the knowledge and concepts in the present 2.0 and 3.0 Web worlds are concerned with who has the information and who has it first. And who better to urge than students of foreign languages to learn to use them to the best of their ability while adhering to all ethical principles?

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Conclusion

Gunnar Handahl (2004, 2007) highlighted the significance of the following dimensions in education:

- Level 1 = Action: You go instruct.
- Level 2: Theoretical and Practical: The Reasons for Going to Teach Your Background, Pedagogical Understanding, Methodological Skills, and Teaching Experience Knowledge was gained as a result of experience.
- Level 3: Values: The ethical and political justification Why do I do what I do? Why am I teaching at all? What does it mean for the people I teach as individuals? To the larger society?

As proven in the preceding article, the level of values and ethics may lead teachers in selecting their medium, processes, and communication patterns when talking with their pupils. Underlying many seemingly practical choices is a worldview based on current research and familiarity with recent theoretical methods. Several years of teaching experience, as well as participant observation as a teacher in various learning groups, aid in the analysis and shaping of the processes. I hope that grounding pupils in more profound theories, ideas, and ethics will assist them in making meaningful decisions.

With the evolution of Web 2.0 and 3.0, there is still limitless potential for innovation, development, and change. Students are getting more involved, and communication and learning are becoming less and less teacher-centered. With these advancements, the roles of instructors, students, and learning itself are constantly evolving to provide exciting opportunities for further development. Many of these breakthroughs will be discovered while working alongside students and colleagues from all around the world.

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