ICT and teaching foreign languages

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The teaching of foreign languages is a complex process that actively involves multiple senses. The use of pictures provides individual students with a tool to connect the new word to a known meaning, thus facilitating understanding and memorization. Words are decoded into sounds that bring languages to life (sign languages being exceptions). The student must also learn how to place the words within sentences to establish effective communication. Although languages can be learned as an individual enterprise, fluency is developed only through the involvement of a group.

The process of learning a second language may be structured in different ways – in a class-room or at home, with or without a teacher, emphasizing or minimizing grammar, gradually exposing the student to native speakers or prompt immersion. No matter where and how the learning occurs, information and communication technologies (ICT) are powerful tools to improve the teaching/learning process.

The use of a tape recorder as an auxiliary tool in foreign language classes is not new. Many books come with tapes that are used to reinforce pronunciation and habituate the student with the different phonemes. New technologies have entered the education field in the past decade. Soska provides a list of technologies that have been used with some success to teach English as a second language.

Technologies

- ***Customizing, Template, and Authoring Programs*** **–** These are computer programs that enable teachers to de-sign their own software. Some are simple templates; others are sophisticated programs using multimedia capability. Teachers can choose an authoring program that better fits their technical skills and design it according to their teaching styles and students' needs.

- ***Compact Disk-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM)*** **–** CD-ROM discs have large storage capacity and can be utilized for a variety of media, including text, graphics, video, and audio. Some CD-ROM discs can store as much as 650 megabytes of information, the equivalent to the entire text of a 20-volume encyclopedia. Different from tapes, which wear out with use, CD-ROM discs resist time and manipulation. They can be used to access dictionaries, databases, interactive books, and other products. However, since they are read-only, they do not offer the flexibility of an authoring program.

- ***Interactive Videodisc*** **–** Videodiscs are also a durable medium to display visual information. Like the CD-ROM discs, they are read by a laser beam and therefore, do not wear with usage. The sound in a videodisc is stored in two different tracks and can be played separately. Thus, the disc can offer two different languages for the same content, or have one track for the student and another for the teacher. In some cases (Level III videodiscs), the disc player is connected to a computer and controlled through a software program, thus offering maximum interactivity.

- ***Digital Audio*** **–** Similar to a traditional tape recorder program, in a digital audio program the student listens to a word or a phrase spoken by a native speaker. Then, he or she repeats the word into the computer microphone and listens as the computer plays it back. The process enables the student to improve pronunciation and listening skills. The advantage of digital audio programs over tape is the quality of sound and its durability.

- ***Telecommunications*** **–** Telephone, fax, cell phones, and computer-related communication technologies ensure the rapid transfer of information over large distances. More than these other technologies, the Internet provides students with the opportunity to access vast amounts of information stored electronically around the world. They can maintain electronic conversations with native speakers or other learners through e-mail and chat rooms, or join list-servers to obtain information about new courses. They can also join a distance education program to improve their knowledge, or learn a new language.

Advantages

For students of a second language, ICTs promote:

- ***Multi-sensorial stimuli*** **–** ICTs, particularly television and computer-related technologies, have the capability to diversify the delivery of information using visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimuli. Students can see the words on the screen, while hearing them being pronounced by a native speaker. Movement adds interest to the scene, bringing enjoyment to a process that may be slow and arduous;

- ***Motivation*** **–** Research shows that students who use technology are likely to stay on task for longer periods of time. Even a simple technology, such as radio, offers a variety of strategies – music, drama-like plots, or comic situations – to attract and maintain the students' attention.

- ***Collaborative learning*** **–** The Internet opens new horizons for the foreign language student by facilitating communication with native speakers through e-mail and audio-digital conferencing. Television and radio pro-grams also offer opportunities for students to be together and participate in common experiences.

- ***Cultural understanding*** **–** Radio, television, movies and the Internet bridge physical and cultural distances. Stu-dents get acquainted with the ways of life of people whose language they are learning. They can visit the distant places without leaving their home. They see the landscapes, the people and their tradition, thus making learning the language part of a cultural experience.

- ***Self-expression*** **–** Through tapes or multimedia pro-grams, individuals who are shy or insecure can practice the language in a safe environment, until they are confident to speak in public. Those who are creative, have venues to explore their talents and curiosity without the limitations of a classroom.

Barriers

The use of ICT is not a panacea that ensures the success of a second language class. Among the barriers to success, three are particularly important:

- ***Lack of familiarity with the technology*** **–** Many teachers will try, or are required to use technology without previous experience or adequate training. They lack an adequate understanding of the technology potential and limitations, and they are unable to deal with even the minimum technical glitches that will certainly occur. For these teachers, the technology is a dream never realized and the feeling is one of frustration.

- ***Lack of adequate planning*** **–** Technology is a tool to help the teacher and students reach educational tools, and never a goal in itself. When the technology is not integrated within the overall lesson plan, the outcomes cannot be successful.

- ***Lack of access*** **–** The most powerful technologies, such as the Internet, are also the most expensive, in the sense that they require existing infrastructure, or a massive initial investment to build this structure (buy computer hardware and software, establish connectivity, pay for services, etc.). Less expensive technologies are also less powerful. For instance, radio is inexpensive to buy and can be used anywhere in the world. In places without electricity, solar-powered stations can broadcast radio programs to a relatively large audience. However, radio does not have the multimedia and interactive capabilities of the Internet, and requires a captive audience, which must be present during broadcast time.