

A brief study on the advantages of using computer technology in the ESL children class

Autor: Ștefan Ferent

Language learners have unprecedented opportunities for developing second language literacy skills and intercultural understanding, in multimedia computer-assisted language learning environments. By using materials on CD-ROM, DVD's or even Web-based resources, the ESL class (English as a second language) becomes more dynamic, attention-grabbing, offering the students new entertaining ways of practicing their listening and responding skills. The premise of this study is starting from is the increase of students' motivation in solving the tasks they are given and therefore of the quality of their acquisitions.

There are some very important advantages regarding the use of multimedia programs in teaching a foreign language. First of all, it should be considered the fact that the combination of the learning paths leads to a greater success in the acquisition of the new language. Students are greatly involved visually, as in multimedia materials; the listening is combined with seeing which is more eye-catching. The student becomes very curious about what images are going to be shown on the monitor and this awakens a sense of anticipation, involving the student more actively in learning the content of the lesson. This learning environment is similar to the one in the real world where listening is combined with seeing which address a natural way of students' learning, especially when they are children. Usually the computer software used in the foreign language class is geared mainly towards the receptive skills such as listening and reading. Computer cannot assess properly the expressive skills (speaking and writing). The current computer technology limitations regard controlled speaking and writing practice. A rather successful application of automatic speech recognition is represented by the pronunciation training where the computer gives a feedback as

to the accuracy of articulation. Still this facility is rather mechanic and it does not encourage the development of the speaking abilities. A valuable solution is offered by using the chat or videoconferencing to help the development of speaking and communication skills. Yet, these options that provide speaking practice, helping students in acquiring language structures that are usually used outside the classroom, not involving the language teacher's control and assessment.

Children up to 12 are very dynamic and eager to prove their capacity of successfully fulfilling any assigned task. They usually enjoy learning, but not in a monotonous environment. They need their creativity and imagination to be challenged and they need a learning process more close to the way they naturally learn daily. The idea of sitting down at a desk and keeping the attention focused to a person or to a book is almost unnatural when it comes to children. A lesson in a book is usually illustrated by 2 or 4 pages with some static images which may look interesting for few minutes but they are not able to keep the child's interests longer. A child that has to sit down and listen is restrained to a passive position and he will lose quickly interest and motivation.

The solution to this serious problem that may explain why a lot of children fail in having the traditional school success is using the computer technology. This way the child is exposed to a dynamic combination of sounds, music, images, combined in an attractive story that makes the child excited to participate to what is happening on the computer screen. Since children of this age love repetition as it addresses their need of anticipation, confirming their knowledge, it involves no effort on the part of the teacher to start over the same lesson whenever necessary to reinforce the acquisitions. Children will never get bored with this as they are given the opportunity to repeat words or sentences together with their favorite characters in a non-stressful environment as he does not feel assessed, but involved.

On the other hand, children will become keener on improving their pronunciation as their models are not represented by an adult (and it may be reasonable for a child not to be able to do what an adult is), but by characters which have a more subtle relation with their own world. A child is deeply motivated to pronounce correctly and to memorize as fast as possible the words and conversational structures used by characters such as Aladdin or Jasmine, Snow White or Mickey

Mouse. Also characters that are not classics, yet establishing a relation to the children's world, being humorous or funny, have the power of giving the children enough motivation to use the English vocabulary in solving computer controlled tasks.

Therefore, the main advantage of using computer programs in the ESL class is that they maintain children attention and stimulate their motivation in actively participating to the class. Another important benefit is the fact that the child is exposed to an instance of language used by native speakers' with great effect on their correct pronunciation as it is well-known that the utterance of some specific sounds is formed during the childhood. If the children have the opportunity of using the English learning software at home, the benefits may be spectacular. The children will repeat the vocabulary daily, in short sessions, obtaining fast and accurate results. The traditional way of memorizing lists of words or of studying texts and performing "fill in the blanks" exercises has brought up a generation of rather passive English language users, with good or very good receptive skills, but poor expressive ones.

By using multimedia programs, the children develop firstly their listening skill and then their speaking one. This is the natural way of learning any language, starting with the mother tongue. It is worth emphasizing another side benefit. By interacting with the computer, children develop their computer use skills and also the sense of sharing in the collaborative classes where more children share a computer. As their language competence gets better, children will be encouraged to use English in their conversation. In time this rule will be easily assumed. On the other hand, the involved images have a teaching value themselves. They represent new and interesting information for children. For example at the lesson about farm animals, children are given the opportunity of observing the animals in their environment. They can hear real sounds from the farm and they can find out more about the activities at farm, by seeing real images or videos of this area of life maybe unknown to them.

The adoption of computer assisted language learning in schools has determined some criticism as to the real efficiency of the method. Some of the highlighted limitations are: the computer cannot properly evaluate the learner's speech, it mainly addresses the receptive skills, it is costly, it cannot provide consistent

feedback, and so on. These limitations are real, yet they are to be compensated by the teacher's active role. The computer technology is not meant to replace the teacher, but to assist him/her. The teacher is the one who should keep the children interest in the language task, not allowing them to invest more of their energy in watching the "form" and missing the valuable content. The language teacher should provide constant feedback; he should make sure the child is grasping the idea by asking questions on the new vocabulary, he should praise the children's success and provide new communication contexts to practice the new vocabulary.

Only the teacher can provide situations in which the poly-semantics and poly-functionality of a word can be understood and exercised. For example, the verb *to take* is part of some fixed structures such as *to take a shower, to take a bath, to take a picture, to take a ride* and so on. The role of the teacher is to practice these structures in different dialogues with the children. While the computer may develop especially the receptive skills, the teacher's role is to develop the expressive ones which are much more related to the human dimension of communication.

In conclusion, the real issue of the computer assisted language learning is namely the lack of sound pedagogic strategies of this learning system. A consistent methodological and pedagogical research should be carried out regarding the use of computer in language classes. In fact the methodology lags behind the software that recently has appeared on the market. Therefore, the limitations are not related to the computer software, but to the assessment of the teaching methods that should be involved. While this problem is to be approached, the reality of the measurable effectiveness of computer assisted training for children learning English as a second language cannot be denied.