TEACHING ESP IN A COMPUTER-MEDIATED ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: *Computers have lately become a constant source of information and communication, spread throughout the world. The aim of the present paper is not to highlight the importance of computer in general but to point out the role that it plays in learning a foreign language, English in our case, in an Academic environment. Online instruction is a well known and frequently used technique nowadays but this doesn't mean that a teacher is no longer needed. On the contrary, my intention is to focus on computer assisted language learning in the class and teacher-student interaction and communication in a technological framework.*

Key words: *computers, ESP, e-learning.*

Introduction

Nowadays, computers and technology in general have become extensive used tools in almost all areas. They have evolved a lot lately and, as a consequence, they have come to have numerous applications in all fields of activity, teaching foreign languages being no exception. Schools and colleges use computers frequently in the curriculum of certain subjects and, lately, English as a subject has started focusing on technology. Better said, computers have brought a great contribution to the evolution of modern teaching, allowing students to be all the time in contact with the most recent communicative tools.

It has become more and more difficult for the teachers to find techniques which would appeal to students during English classes. Teaching ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in a computer mediated environment, even though difficult to achieve, has become a prevailing feature of active classes.

Many researchers showed that using computers in class increases student motivation due to the interactive nature of activities, also allowing them to experience real-life situations. "With the rapid development of the Internet, computer use in the classroom also offers additional possibilities for designing communicative tasks such as those built around computer-mediated communication and tele-collaboration, including the ability to interact in real time with written and oral communication, to conduct information searches to find attractive and meaningful material and to engage in distance learning and e-learning". (MAYORA, 2006: 16)

Getting in touch with the latest models of CVs, letters of application, memos, reports, etc is just one of the numerous facilities that they offer. Communicating on computer is no longer an alternative method but a necessary part of our everyday lives. Electronic mail is perhaps as spread as the conventional letter while the number of people (especially those involved in the present educational system) that use the information on the internet is constantly increasing. Therefore, a language teacher should be aware of the instructional materials that modern computer applications have made available and try to include them in the daily teaching. Computers should be perceived as effective tools in the teaching of a foreign language because they may offer a great variety of activities that may increase students' ability to acquire the language in a proficient way.

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Roseanne Greenfield points out the positive effects of communicating with students by means of computers. She brings together several opinions of people who have actually made important research related to this topic, leading us to the idea that computers are both necessary and important in teaching foreign languages.

"Previous research suggests that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can facilitate communication (Cooper & Selfe, 1990), reduce anxiety (Kern, 1995; Sullivan, 1993), increase oral discussion (Pratt & Sullivan, 1994), develop the writing/thinking connection (Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996), facilitate social learning (Barker & Kemp, 1990), promote egalitarian class structures (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), enhance student motivation (Warschauer, 1996a), and improve writing skills (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Cononelos & Oliva, 1993; Warschauer, 1996b). In light of these positive effects, an increasing number of ESL teachers have embraced CMC exchanges". (GREENFIELD, 2003: 1).

How Teachers Cope with Computers

It is thus obvious that computers represent nowadays an important source of information not only for the specialists but also for the non-specialists. Smaller devices than used to be in the past, faster and easier to deal with, they can be successfully used by teachers, simplifying many of the tasks considered to be relatively complex. It is essential to mention that teachers who decide to bring a computer into the class must be ready to fulfil their tasks in a computer mediated environment. Problems that may be encountered when designing the lessons should be solved before entering the class. If the English teacher doesn't succeed in mastering the multimedia activities he/she prepares in advance, then he/she shouldn't introduce them to the students. Kasper Loretta states that:

"Instructors who incorporate the Internet into their ESL courses must themselves be comfortable with and competent users of computer technology. In this way, they will be able to teach students how to use that technology to improve language learning, and they will be able to develop interesting and valuable content-based lessons". (KASPER, 2000: 189)

However, although computers are no longer difficult to access, there may often raise problems in the sense that they evolve quickly and teachers may be hindered by not being able to keep up with their performance. Still, we should bear in mind that language teachers are not IT specialists. Their main targets should be that of selecting the web resources and improve them if possible in order to make students develop their language skills in a dynamic environment. Teachers should mainly focus on the new techniques that may improve the quality of the teaching act. Just as Michael Levy argues:

"The speed with which technology has developed since the invention of the computer has been both extraordinary and surprisingly sustained. For educators, the rapid and continuing introduction of new technology into education has outpaced the ability of teachers (…) to evaluate it properly. (…). Nevertheless, it would be irresponsible to be led purely by the latest technological breakthrough. Somehow, we must try and make sense of what is going on, in spite of the rate of change, and invent reliable and cost-effective mechanisms for dealing with it". (LEVY, 1997: 1)

Problems in a Computer Teaching Environment

Internet may offer benefits in the ESL instruction starting from authentic materials in the sense that many texts are designed for native English speakers to possibilities of developing the reading skills (students that navigate the Internet usually

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unconsciously interact with a great deal of information, thus anticipating meaning, practicing skimming or guessing the main ideas from the context, etc) and the writing skills (by providing a variety of opportunities to engender a meaningful communication). The numerous videos, job interviews on line, phone calls and other recordings may be of great help in the practice of the listening skills. All these reading, writing and listening activities prove to be a challenging, interesting and enjoyable way of determining students to engage in the speaking tasks. Thus, Internet could be a rich resource that may improve the quality of language learning.

In order to improve EFL instruction "one important alternative is to take advantage of the continuing advances in multimedia technology and to make an effort to integrate this technology with in-class instruction". (MAYORA, 2006: 14) Yet, it is true that using computers in class is not an easy task since not all classes have the necessary technological equipment and moving students to informatics labs might be difficult. Thus, problems can occur despite a well prepared teacher and lesson.

Perhaps the most common one in our country is that most classrooms lack the necessary equipment to allow a computer session. Other common issues are related to the students' background experience as far as computers are concerned. The language teacher should have in view all these aspects so that students who didn't have the chance in the past to work on a computer don't feel bad or inferior in comparison with their colleagues when the language lesson starts. Kasper Loretta mentions that: "although the Internet can be a powerful tool in the content-based classroom, instructors must be aware of and prepared to deal with some of the problems that may arise when they incorporate technology into their courses. Many of our ESL students come from societies or financial situations in which they had limited access to computer technology (Smoke, 1997). These students will almost certainly be unfamiliar, and may well be uncomfortable, with the Internet. Providing guidance through step-by-step instructions and questions designed to direct their Internet work can help to put these students at ease". (KASPER, 2000: 189)

On the other hand, many classes don't offer the possibility of having a computer for each and every student. Yet, there are activities that may be used in classes using only one computer or the personal laptop of the teacher and a projector. Mark Warschauer, author of "Electronic Literacies: Language, Culture, and Power in Online Education", in an interview for "Forum" magazine stated that "Often, we put too much emphasis on having the fanciest equipment and how many ROM and how many RAM, when sometimes with just one simple computer we can do so much". (ANCKER, 2002:4)

Activities related to the Use of Computer in Class

There are several activities which may be used during classes to make them more dynamic and appealing to students. Computer-based tasks may be used in all stages of a lesson – be it as a lead-in activity, during the initial or secondary practice and even during feed-back. The teacher may use his/her personal computer to form activities that change the monotony of a lesson. For example, when teaching Present Simple versus Present Continuous, the teacher can use several pictures in Power Point, pictures presenting activities and ask students to describe what they see in the pictures. It is not necessary for all students to have their computers in front of them, only one computer with a projector would be enough. During lead-in, the teacher starts sliding the images and asks students to tell their opinion on them. It is well known that sometimes one feels more confident to speak freely than following some imposed rules.

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And, since many of the students have a visual memory, it is likely they would remember the images even after the lesson. So, without even being aware of the difference between the two tenses, they use them accordingly on each and every image.

A necessary feature of ESP classes is to make students achieve certain tasks which would help them in their future careers. Thus, students in Economics are mostly interested in being able to use commercial correspondence appropriately. Computers are great helping tools when dealing with such goals. For example, the teacher may divide his/her group into two – one playing the role of bank customers who aren't content with the services offered and the other group formed of bank clerks who need to face difficult situations and deal with them accordingly. The first group is asked to write letters of complaint to the bank and send them via e-mail to their colleagues while the latter needs to answer them and find the proper solutions to their problems. It's a way of making the students realize that sometimes it is more difficult to use the formal style in a letter than simply writing a letter of complaint using a certain pattern. At the end, "the customers" need to present their opinions and their content or discontent regarding the received answers.

During classes, it is highly important to maintain a vivid atmosphere, to offer students the possibility to express themselves or even to let free their imagination. And how can that be achieved if not by using computers to make students guess what certain commercials talk about? It's a funny and more active way of dealing with marketing strategies during English classes. The teacher brings to class a computer and projects commercials without their ending, asking students to guess what the commercial refers to or which the target of that company is. The students become more interested into the subject since some of them may have already encountered those commercials while others just take a wild guess about them. It's interesting and fun since both motion and sound make the presentation more appealing than simply bringing pictures.

The use of videos during English classrooms can "be more appealing and entertaining for the students than audio exclusive materials; expose students to authentic language in natural situations; provide a situational and visual context to language interactions; and expose students to authentic nonverbal (body language, cultural traditions) and verbal (register, colloquial speech) elements of language". (MAYORA, 2006: 16)

Even if it seems a rather lengthy activity, bringing movies into class from time to time increases students' interest in the subject. More and more textbooks come together with a DVD containing some short-time movies on different subjects. For example, when discussing interviews with students in Economics it would be a great idea for the teacher to present to them a short movie or recording with an interview. The students have the possibility of not being simply spectators since, at the end, they will discuss what the interviewee did well or wrong or the relevance of the interviewers' questions. They can also receive some worksheets with tasks to be performed before, while or after watching the recording. The teacher can also extend the activity by making a role-play with a job interview. The students prepare the interviews and then act them out.

"A final word on technology: whatever you use it for in the classroom, it is not going to do the job for you. You will still have a great responsibility as a conscientious materials developer and adviser to develop the multimedia activities and to train students in their proper use". (MAYORA, 2006: 20)

Thus, teachers are the ones who decide upon the engagement of their students during a class. It is important to offer opportunities for learners to exchange ideas and

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opinions and engage with the material on a personal level. Activities should be as realistic as possible so that students can see how the language they're learning can be applied outside the classroom. Computers present authentic materials so that students can be exposed to a variety of real situations and language.

In conclusion, computers are a necessary and useful tool in teaching foreign languages. Although the teacher may encounter some problems when he/she decides to perform the course in a computer mediated environment, solutions can be found each and every time in order for the lesson to become enjoyable and successful.

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