LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ASSESSMENT IN A HIGHLY TECHNOLOGICAL ERA

Laura IONICĂ*

Abstract: *Teachers' and students' conformation to technology is no longer a much debated issue, since it has brought about positive results both in the teaching and the learning process. The technological era has produced accurate information about language acquisition and assessment. These two dimensions have been substantially improved by using computers, widely considered intelligent machines whose main role is to simplify work in general and to place education in a different light. The present work aims at highlighting the prevalent role of computers in acquiring and assessing language. Computer technology is part of the near future and through its multitude of facets, it stands for both evolution and reform of the teaching and learning process.*

Keywords: *assessment, computer technology, reform, language acquisition.*

Teaching a foreign language has become a multi-faceted issue among teachers worldwide. On the one hand, the educational system requires them to teach their students the basics in order to improve language, on the other hand, teachers find it difficult to face the challenges of technology. Traditional teaching based on communication, human interaction or such tools as boards, books, notebooks or pencils seems to have become a reminiscence of the past. It has been partially replaced by more sophisticated methods and instruments such as: computer-based teaching, learning or assessment, interactive whiteboards, i-Pads, cell phones, e-books.

The abundance of technology information has made the computer become a reliant source in our lives. Whether one goes shopping, to a petrol station, to a bank or to a hotel, it is practically impossible not to face the technology reality. Somehow, it helps users to operate quicker and more efficiently. However, its negative sides should be neither ignored, nor minimized. Potential bad sides may consist in inoperable computers, cyberattacks, faults in technology infrastructure, loss of information etc.

Unlike language literacy, a concept frequently adopted in the past, whose main role was to help learners develop language skills using more or less traditional methods, computer literacy seems more topical and fashionable, pertaining to all walks of life. The reading, writing, speaking and listening skills are now approached from the perspective of technology which seems to lay more emphasis on accuracy, operability and authenticity.

Not only do computers help learners to broaden their horizon, but they also bring substantial contribution to time-saving, fluency and provide great opportunities to present input material in a variety of ways and settings.

The present work aims at highlighting the prevalent role of computers in acquiring and assessing language. We will conduct a contrastive analysis between traditional and virtual teaching in order to establish the common and different borders.

* University of Pitesti, lionica1976@yahoo.com

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In terms of language acquisition, the skills to be approached from a computer-based perspective are: reading, writing, listening and speaking. We explore reading in relation to text comprehension, fluency and response inference in a multiple-choice variant. Writing comprises such elements as accuracy, grammar and vocabulary range, style etc. Listening is already an integral part of the computerized world, since it is generally done online. Speaking can be tackled as a fruitful interaction and cooperation either between human entities or human-computer.

As regards language assessment, the article focuses on the multitude of tests, online evaluation, as well as the development of self-assessment methods. On the other hand, we will explore a wide range of virtual tools that ensure the improvement of computer skills with a view to broadening learners' horizon.

Traditional versus Computer-Assisted Teaching Methods

The last decade in teaching has been dominated by virtual reality whose role is to better emphasize the advantages of advanced technology in all walks of life. The teaching process has also adhered to this reality for many reasons. On the one hand, computers have prompted novelty, dynamism and accuracy of information. On the other hand, teachers have the possibility to record their students' performance easier and quicker. Students, in their turn, may systematically benefit from detailed feedback in order to make progress in the specific language. Unlike cumbersome traditional methods in which learners couldn't get the expected results due to lack of objectivity or time management, modern computerized strategies seem to regenerate the whole educational system. The rapid flow of information that can be presented in a variety of ways, the creation of methods to tailor to learners' needs and interests, as well as the richness of multimedia were strategically incorporated both in the classroom setting and outside it.

Both physical and temporal circumstances have been changed. Traditional teaching occurring mostly in the classroom has been extended to various contexts or settings. Irrespective of the time or place a learner finds himself, it is much easier for him to get access to information. The cultural framework is no longer confined to an insular space, where learners do not have many possibilities to make progress, since technology has initiated a different dimension of learning, I would say, *on the run*.

The speed of information has by far outrun face-to-face interaction, without minimizing its importance. Long-distance communication seems to be more open and more reliable. The anxiety of meeting someone in person, the linguistic barriers that may arise or any type of inhibition no longer fit the portrait of human connectivity.

The easiness of expressing ideas or feelings using electronic tools such as e-mails, cell phones, blogs, social networking etc., has become a key element among interactive participants. Teachers prefer online interaction with their students because it is more practical and feasible. Take for example an exchange of information in terms of spreading curricular topics, assessing quality of writing or quickness of response. Both parties have a lot of advantages in terms of space and time management, access to materials such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias and last but not least to the right feedback.

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To sum up, traditional teaching has its good sides and it is still used on a large scale worldwide, in comparison with computer-assisted methods that provide us with inexhaustible sources of well-structured information.

Approaching Language Skills through Electronic Means

As a vehicle of delivery for language skills, the computer is intended to create a different space of interpretation, validation and capitalization of the information nuances. Reading a text goes far beyond its general understanding as a mixture of ideas, new lexical structures or grammatical analysis. The computer-based text embeds a dynamics that gives it consistency and substantiality. Aside from being continuously changed, reshaped and restructured, the virtual text takes on authentic connotations and gets practicality. The large amount of data including images, visual prompts, graphics etc., help learners develop creativity and find multiple variants of interpretation. Except for the technical and academic texts, whose analysis is more rigid, due to their specialized words, all the other pieces of texts bay be enriched with an elaborate pragmatics and stylistics.

Writing takes place in an extremely flexible framework, which the computer provides in terms of: content vocabulary, register, syntactic categories etc. The chances are that every piece of writing accompanied by online resources will become more readable and comprehensible. The written text can undergo infinite changes, it can be improved, redefined and reanalysed from different perspectives.

Unlike traditional writing occurring in the classroom that may be prone to inaccuracy or inadequacy, today's writing dominated by computers is ready at hand and it undergoes no pressure. Students do not have to face time limits or their assessors' subjectivity because they feel more freedom in scribbling down their own ideas.

Listening is not under the threat of misinterpretation, as long as the audio part is wholly and clearly grasped. Speaking topics rendered appropriately help speakers not only to capture public attention but also to persuade audience. Any subject involves two active parties. The electronic era has promoted interaction based on two or more entities equally concerned with contextual comprehension, coherence and fluency.

Visual prompts are more team-related and their approach aims at emphasizing both similarities and differences. The electronic medium allows developers of language skills to engage students in new experiences and to give them access to personalized learning styles. The ability to use language is translated into the ability to find and extend language through appropriate technologies.

If past practices promoted imitative rendering of information, laying emphasis on cognition as the fundamental factor of progress in language, modern times and technological advances no longer focus on what learners acquire through language but on their need to know how to handle software. Technology has become the cultural heritage of any community, whereas its intrinsic value is not denied as long as it serves a good purpose: getting performance in language acquisition.

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Positive and Negative Aspects of Language Assessment Through Technology

The Cambridge exam format is not novelty in terms of language assessment. Irrespective of the language level being tested, users and developers of online tests have faced a series of challenges that are worth mentioning. First it is the learners' challenge to be evaluated by computers and the test developers' burden to create the most adequate formats to meet test takers' needs and expectations. Test taking involves laborious work because it needs to comply with school curriculum, learners' level of language and their ability to tackle more or less complex tasks.

Some pertinent questions to be asked are: do examinees feel at ease with computers?, what is their level of familiarization with technology? do they have control over all the challenges that the digital world brought into their lives? These questions find a suitable answer especially when students finish their tests and are given feedback by their teachers. As stated by Carroll, a test is "a procedure designed to elicit certain behaviour from which one can take inferences about certain characteristics." (Carroll, 1968, p. 46).

The main elements to be considered when testing learners are: structure, level, instructions, time allotment etc. Previously, learners had to be conveyed with the right materials in order to carry out their tasks. Depending on the skill, the test infrastructure needs to be in perfect accordance with examinees' competences. Unlike paper tests that require more attention as regards the accuracy of variants, computer-based tests need quickness of response and connection availability.

Online instructions should be listened to and followed accordingly, as long as the acoustics work at full potential. Poor acoustics may be detrimental to examinees' and therefore affect the quality of responses. The use of multimedia in test taking may have positive or negative sides. Images, sounds, videos etc., may help students in carrying out tasks successfully or on the contrary may affect their power of concentration. A rapid flow of images may cause confusion and deviation from the test course.

In terms of multiple-choice tests, computers play a more significant role than humans. The former provide learners with accuracy and speed, whereas the latter do need time to consider the right answers or the range of variants is so intricate that they find it difficult to decide on the good one. However, when assessing written tasks, humans are superior to computers. The text analysed traditionally is better parsed syntactically, is given a pragmatic interpretation and vocabulary is analysed contextually. The same approach would be much more complex with computers.

As stated by Wainer et al., computer-delivery may affect "the mental processes required to respond correctly to the item" (Wainer et al., 2000).

This idea can be correlated with another sensitive issue referring to the examinees' level of anxiety. The psychological factors have a dominant role, especially when technology is involved. Aside from the test difficulty, students are likely to lose their self-confidence which may result in low performance. Being too much focused on how to handle technology at full potential, students may disregard the real purpose of their tests. They are no longer interested in the quality of their skills, because their attention is directed to the rapid changes occurring in computerized systems.

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Continuous scrolling or moving from one page to another is also detrimental to test takers because they may lose the logical thread of the task or affect the choice of the response. From this perspective, paper-based tests would be preferable and better operated.

Conclusions

The impact of technology on language acquisition and assessment is obvious from what was stated in the subchapters of the present work. The intrinsic value of computers derives from its serving a good reason - performance in learning and assessing. We have approached technology from two different perspectives: its usefulness and drawbacks. As regards the positive sides, we have highlighted all the aspects that contribute to a better understanding of language and a better assessment. Computers proved to be reliable sources of authenticity, practicality and interactivity. In terms of drawbacks, technology was considered difficult to use especially by the uninitiated in the field of electronics. The difficulty also arose from other aspects such as: the high level of anxiety, potential technical errors, poor time management, the rapid changes in technology etc.

To sum up, the virtual world may be considered a living organism, integrated into the heritage of the educational setting, and highly impactful on our daily lives.

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