Foreign Language Teaching Via ICT

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Abstract

After a brief overview of the growing use of computers in foreign language teaching, the authoresses list and detail on the roles of the computer in class (teacher, tester, tool, communication facilitator, data source) as well as on the advantages of the use of ICT. They also provide an example of an ICT class, with some valuable tips for teachers. They conclude that the use of computers makes classes more vivid, pleasant and appealing to students.

Keywords: ICT, Internet, hypermedia, class management

Rezumat

După o privire generală asupra utilizării calculatoarelor în predarea limbilor străine, autoarele prezintă și analizează rolul calculatoarelor în clasă (ca și instructor, instrument, mediator de comunicare, sursă de informație) dar și avantajele utilizării TIC. De asemenea, autoarele oferă exemple de clase asistate de TIC, cu sugestii pentru profesori. Concluzia articolului este că utilizarea calculatoarelor în predare face orele mai plăcute și mai interesante pentru studenți.

Cuvinte cheie: TIC, Internet, hipermedia, managementul clasei
There has been much debate over the use of computers and the Internet in Foreign Language Teaching over the past few years. The techniques offered, the activities and the degree of application in the language teaching syllabus have undergone a number of serious changes alongside the evolution of technology. The computer itself has evolved from the status of “tutor” to the one of “tool”.

The computer as a tool stage refers to the usage of computers as vehicles for delivering instructional materials to learners (through drill and practice). The development of computer – based activities developed learner – computer and learner – learner interaction, engaging the learners in a wide range of communicative tasks. This was the moment computers assumed the role of stimuli in language learning. “The computer as a tool stage” refers to using computers as instruments for understanding and using language through spelling and grammar checkers, desktop editing programmes. All these steps belong to CALL (Computer-assisted language learning).

The methodology of language learning has developed a new way of using ICT in teaching, the Hypermedia. Hypermedia provides the language teacher and the language learner with multimedia resources, such as texts, graphics, sound, animation, video linked together. It also has a number of advantages omitted by CALL. It offers an authentic learning environment, it combines listening with seeing. Skills can easily be integrated in the teaching/learning process; reading, writing, speaking, listening can be combined in task- based learning.

It is also better for learners to use Hypermedia in classes. They have greater control over their learning because they can go at their own pace, they can do some activities on their own, can skip some parts of the text or revise the ones they find difficult. Another major advantage of hypermedia usage is that the learner can focus on the content and access different links with grammar explanations, exercises, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.

But, above all, hypermedia brings variety to your class. Students get used to learning the foreign language in a new and pleasant way, not just by interacting with the teacher and reading from the book.

The application of ICT gives more opportunities for communication between peer learners: they can exchange information in real time, they can participate in blog discussions, work in teams on different projects, exchange emails, search for information, etc. By using the authentic material provided by the Internet, we will have a better insight into the culture of the country and people whose language we study.

The Internet also offers a wide variety of reference materials like online dictionaries, e-encyclopaedias and search mechanisms very helpful for developing students’ individual work. They can find, alone, the missing information, the meaning of new words, synonyms, antonyms or can communicate with the rest of the group online, via e-mail or in any other ICT environment.
In a language classroom the computer may have the following roles:

- teacher – it teaches students new language
- tester - it tests students on the already learned structures
- tool – it assists students to do certain tasks
- data source – it provides students with the information they need to solve different tasks
- communication facilitator – it allows students to communicate with others.

Let us discuss in detail each of the roles the computer has in a language class.

**Computer as a teacher.** In the early years of CALL in schools some reluctant teachers made assumptions that in a few years teachers would no longer be needed in schools, their role being taken over by computers. It is not the case, as we can very well see. Computerized teaching (computer as a teacher) uses multimedia CD ROMS. In such programmes, students can listen to recordings, watch videos, speak into the microphone, record their progress or learn words by clicking on pictures and hearing their pronunciation. An alternative to CD ROMS is the World Wide Web. Students can practice all their skills there and it is more useful for the teacher than the CD ROM because teachers can intervene with their own ideas or materials.

**Computer as a tester.** Students can practice their knowledge of a specific language using different Internet websites. A problem these sites have is the fact that the practice programmes are very limited in terms of practice materials. Basically, the practice material refers to multiple – choice exercises, dual – choice exercises, true or false. The only answer the computer can give is Right or Wrong.

Despite these limitations computer grammar or vocabulary practice is enjoyed by students because the latter feel like playing and get the feedback without fearing the teacher’s criticism. They can also work in groups, sitting at the same computer and discussing the answers.

**Computer as a tool.** Computers are seen as tools because they provide tools for acquiring a foreign language. The large number of web-sites, pictures, projects, exercises, audio and video materials are all tools in the teaching and learning process.

**Computer as a data source.** Little should be said about computers as information providers because we all know that, due to computers and the Internet, we can access almost any information we need. A particular aspect that we want to highlight is random Internet navigation. It refers to students surfing the web with no particular aim. That is why teachers should offer them a number of useful websites and guide them in such a way as to find out information as soon as possible and solve their tasks.

**Computer as communication facilitator.** Nowadays the Internet is the principal medium by which students can communicate with others. This can be done by e-mail, by chatting, or by participating in discussion forums. Teachers can set up discussion forums and use them to communicate with their students. Or students can exchange didactic e-mails, discussing a topic presented in the classroom or any other topic of interest.

The advantages of ICT usage in Foreign Language Teaching can be grouped as:
1. Capacity to control presentation. This capacity marks the difference between computers and books. Books have a fixed presentation, unlike computers, which can combine visual with listening materials, text with graphics and pictures.

2. Novelty and creativity. A teacher can use different materials for each lesson, not like in teaching with textbooks, where all classes presenting a certain topic are the same.

3. Feedback. Computers provide a fast feedback to students` answers through error correction. It not only spots the mistake but also corrects it, sometimes even giving the appropriate advice.

4. Adaptability. Computer programmes can be adapted by teachers to suit their students` needs and level of language knowledge. Unlike books, which are produced in a single uniform format and need to be taught irrespectively of students` problems, computer programmes are more learner-friendly.

We have pointed out the advantages of using ICT in the classroom. But we also want to state that they can not replace traditional teaching methods. Textbooks and any other printed materials are very necessary in the teaching/learning process. But ICT lessons can alternate traditional classes, or traditional activities can be improved by using the computer or the Internet.

We have also designed an ICT class, based on the lesson “I Always Have Coffee” in the textbook “Snapshot” for the 6th grade.

The level of the students is pre-intermediate. The teacher wants to develop their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. As far as the class management is concerned, students are divided into pairs, each pair working on one computer. The lesson in the textbook is about Jon Bon Jovi, a famous singer, but this time the textbook is regarded only as a starting-point for the lesson.

The teacher`s task is:

- to prepare the class carefully
- to know the stages of the lesson and its exact timing
- to design activities for each stage
- to be able to guide the students while working with the Internet
- to have extra activities prepared in case something goes wrong
- to ask for students` e-mail addresses in advance.

As a warm-up activity, the teacher starts the lesson by asking students to have a look at the pictures in the textbook. From that moment on, the textbook is no longer necessary, the only resource being the computer.

Some tips for using computer activities:

- the teacher asks the students to find out as much information as possible about the singer in a limited span of time
- if they have trouble finding a suitable website, the teacher should guide them: → www.bonjovi.com, http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Bon_Jovi
the teacher asks the students to write a fact file of Jon Bon Jovi, giving Madonna’s as an example → http://madonna105.tripod.com/madonna4ever/id4.html (it is a good way of practicing the students’ reading skills, especially skimming and scanning)

After completing the task, students exchange fact files via e-mail. Reading the e-mails can be assigned as homework.

The teacher sends them an e-mail with a questionnaire about the singer and the students have to fill it in. The teacher’s involvement in the activity gives students confidence and makes them feel closer to the teacher.

For developing the listening skills, students listen to “Always”, a song performed by the band. The teacher gives them the link (www.youtube.com) and handouts with the lyrics. After listening to the songs, they have to find synonyms and antonyms of certain words and use them in context.

These are only a few suggestions of how to use computers in a foreign language class. As we have mentioned before, we are not yet in the position of using the computer for all our classes. There is a curriculum that must be followed. But using computers and the Internet from time to time makes the class more vivid and pleasant. It is a way of escaping routine and it awakens the interest of our students.

Computers can be used with young learners too, because there are a lot of songs and fairy tales on the Internet. Some good websites with teaching materials for young learners are: www.britishcouncil.org (games and songs), www.mes-english.com, www.elskidstuff.com.

We will not go into details about using these websites but we will tell you that the more colourful and musical your class is, the more pleasant and successful it is.

Bibliography
6) www.britishcouncil.org.