

## COMPUTER –MEDIATED AND SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### Introduction

Virtually every type of language teaching has had its own technologies to support it. Language teachers who followed the grammar-translation method (in which the teacher explained grammatical rules and students performed translations) relied on one of the most ubiquitous technologies in education, the blackboard? The perfect vehicle for the one-way transmission of information that method implied. The blackboard was later supplemented by the overhead projector, another excellent medium for the teacher-dominated classroom, as well as by early computer software programs which provided what were known as "drill-and-practice" grammatical exercises.

In contrast, the audio-tape was the perfect medium for the audio-lingual method (which emphasized learning through oral repetition). University language classes in the 1970s and '80s usually included obligatory sessions at the audio lab where students would perform the dreaded repetition drills. By the late 1970s, the audio-lingual method fell into disrepute, at least in part due to poor results achieved from expensive language laboratories. Whether in the lab or in the classroom, repetitive drills which focused only on language form and ignored communicative meaning achieved poor results. The 1980s and 1990s have seen a shift toward communicative language teaching, which emphasizes student engagement in authentic, meaningful interaction. Within this general communicative trend, we can note two distinct perspectives, both of which have their implications in terms of how to best integrate technology into the classroom. These can roughly be divided into cognitive approaches and socio-cognitive approaches. Multimedia simulation software allows learners to enter into computerized micro worlds with exposure to language and culture in a meaningful audio-visual context. The best of these programs allow learners a good deal of control and interactivity so they can better manipulate their linguistic input

### Computer-Mediated Communication in a Classroom

There are several different approaches for using the Internet to facilitate interaction within and across discourse communities. One way is to use online activities to foster increased opportunities for interaction within a single class.

This takes place both through computer-assisted classroom discussion and through outside-of-class discussion.

Computer-assisted classroom discussion makes use of synchronous ("real-time") writing programs. The class meets in a networked computer lab, and students communicate through writing rather than through talking. Students type in their messages and hit a key to instantly send the message to the rest of the class. All the messages are listed chronologically on the top half of the screen and can be easily scrolled through and re-read. The entire session can later be saved and passed on to students, either in electronic form or hard copy.

Outside-of-class discussion is usually carried out using asynchronous tools, such as e-mail or conferencing systems. Special lists can be set up so that students' messages get automatically forwarded to either a small group or the whole class. Electronic communication within a single class might be viewed as an artificial substitute for face-to-face communication. However, it has been found to have a number of beneficial features which make it a good tool for language learning. First, computer-assisted discussion tends to feature more equal participation than face-to-face discussion; teachers or a few outspoken students are less likely to dominate the floor, resulting in class discussions which are more fully collaborative

### Computer-Mediated Communication for Long Distance Exchange

Computer-mediated communication between long-distance partners offers many of the same advantages, and then some. In particular, it allows students the opportunity for target language practice in situations where such practice might otherwise be difficult. This is especially important in foreign language instruction where students might have few other opportunities for authentic target language use. Long-distance exchange projects have been organized in a number of ways, generally using e-mail but also using Web-based conferencing systems or various types of software for synchronous chatting. The most effective exchange projects are ones that are well-integrated into the course goals and are based on

purposeful investigation rather than just electronic chat (Warschauer, 1999).

#### Accessing Resources and Publishing on the World Wide Web

The World Wide Web offers a vast array of resources from throughout the world. While the majority of Web pages are in English, increasing numbers exist in other commonly-taught (and some uncommonly-taught) languages. Accessing and using these pages in language education supports a socio-cognitive approach by helping immerse students in discourses that extend well beyond the classroom, their immediate communities, and their language textbook. This is particularly critical for foreign language students who otherwise experience the target culture only through their instructor and select curricula. Students can use Web pages as authentic materials for conducting research on culture and current events or for gathering material for class projects. Students can also publish their own work on the World Wide Web, thus enabling writing for a real audience. In some cases, teachers have created in-class online newsletters or magazines that their classes have produced. In other cases, teachers' help their students contribute to international Web magazines which include articles from many students around the world. And in other situations, students work together in collaborative teams internationally and then publish the results of their projects on the Web.

#### ESL Instruction and Technology

Much teacher autonomy is encouraged and supported in the computer-based curriculum development process. Instructors are supplied with training and templated instructional routines to which they can fit their own objectives, content, and activities. In addition to developing the actual online curriculum, teachers also develop a paper-based course packet to accompany the courses they design. They essentially have free reign to shape the course as they see best, do so within the communicative framework that guides their professional development as graduate students, and exercise a great deal of initiative.

Activities involve speaking, listening, reading, and writing with, around, and about technology. Task-based exercises are carried out online individually or collaboratively in the computer laboratory. Such tasks might focus on controversial topics regarding telecommunications or might focus on development of practical skills. In short, activities require learners to use

computers and the Internet to accomplish concrete, authentic tasks using English as the medium.

One typical assignment involves having students join a chat site to argue the merits of a controversial topic, such as bilingualism. The students participate in extended online discussions, and then report back on these discussions to the class. Additionally, students' work is made public through Web sites, and students' classmates and teachers later have the opportunity to provide feedback on these published works. In some cases students are assigned joint editorial work on a Web essay or multimedia presentation.

#### Bilingual Instruction and Technology

Design of the Advanced Grammar and Composition is very much driven by a learner centered approach to language instruction. The instructor adheres to the notion that students learn language best when they take on very active roles in engaging in and shaping their own learning processes. This is a particularly critical issue at the advanced level where there is great variation in learner needs and abilities. Orlando sees his preparation of and provision for the multiple resources he develops and makes accessible to his students via the Internet as an integral aspect of motivating and supporting an active and engaged language learner. Whereas Web-based assignments, resources, and online tools comprise the key material with which the course's major activities and assignments are undertaken, it is the dialogic use of the target language in the classroom that forms the core of this language-through-content curriculum. Technologies serve to feed and support these communicative processes.

#### Evaluation

Students participating in language-through-technology have responded very positively to both the content and methods. Teachers in the language teaching, who have ongoing opportunities to assess language development through observing the process and product of students' online, oral, and written work, have felt that the use of technology has been highly advantageous, both for helping improve students' general language abilities and especially for assisting students learn the kind of Internet-based English communication and research skills increasingly necessary for academic and professional success.

#### Advantages and Disadvantages

What then are the advantages and disadvantages of using new technologies in the language classroom? One

question often asked by administrators is whether or not technologies truly "work," that is, if they promote language learning and do so in a cost-effective way. These types of questions motivated much research in the 1970s comparing use of computers to non-use of computers. This type of research ignored two important factors. First of all, the computer is a machine, not a method. The world of online communication is a vast new medium, comparable in some ways to books, print, or libraries. To our knowledge, no one has ever attempted to conduct research on whether the book or the library is beneficial for language learning. Seeking similar sweeping conclusions on the effects of the computer or the Internet is equally futile.

Secondly, and even more importantly, new communications technologies are part of the broader ecology of life at the turn of the century. Much of our reading, writing, and communicating is migrating from other environments (print, telephone, etc.) to the screen. In such a context, we can no longer think only about how we use technologies to teach language. We also must think about what types of language students need to learn in order to communicate effectively via computer. Whereas a generation ago, we taught foreign language students to write essays and read magazine articles, we now must (also) teach them to write e-mail messages and conduct research on the Web. This realization has sparked an approach which emphasizes the importance of new information technologies as a legitimate medium of communication in their own right rather than simply as teaching tools.

In summary, then, the advantages of using new technologies in the language classroom can only be interpreted in light of the changing goals of language education and the changing conditions in postindustrial society. Language educators now seek not only (or even principally) to teach students the rules of grammar, but rather to help them gain apprenticeship into new discourse communities. This is accomplished through creating opportunities for authentic and meaningful interaction both within and outside the classroom, and providing students the tools for their own social, cultural, and linguistic exploration. The computer is a powerful tool for this process as it allows students access to online environments of international communication. By using new technologies in the language classroom, we can better prepare students for the kinds of international cross-cultural interactions which are increasingly required for success in academic, vocational, or personal life. What then are the

potential disadvantages of using new technologies for language teaching? We focus on three aspects: investment of money, investment of time, and uncertainty of results.

### Conclusion

Computer technology is not a panacea for language teaching; using it demands substantial commitments of time and money and brings no guaranteed results. Yet, when appropriately implemented, new technologies provide the means to help reshape both the content and processes of language education. Appropriate use of new technologies allows for a more thorough integration of language, content, and culture than ever before and provides students with unprecedented opportunities for autonomous learning. Computer technologies not only help teachers and students to transcend linguistic, geographical, and time barriers but also to build bridges between bilingual, ESL, and foreign language programs. The use of new technologies allows students to engage in the types of online communication and research which will be paramount for success in their academic and professional pursuits.

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