

An overview on the use of new technologies in English language teaching

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this work is to discuss some aspects related to the use of new technologies in the teaching and learning of English. Some advantages and disadvantages for this use in the English class will be presented; and comments on some of the difficulties or barriers teachers may face when using the new technologies in their classes will be made.

Key words: new technologies, teaching, learning, English language.

RESUMO. *Considerações sobre o uso de novas tecnologias no ensino de língua inglesa.* O objetivo deste trabalho é discutir alguns pontos relacionados ao uso de novas tecnologias no processo de ensino-aprendizagem de língua inglesa. Algumas das vantagens e desvantagens de tal uso nas salas de aula de inglês serão apresentadas, bem como serão discutidas algumas das dificuldades em usar tais recursos em sala de aula.

Palavras-chave: novas tecnologias, ensino-aprendizagem, língua inglesa.

Introduction

Nowadays, we live in a world that is essentially characterized by the globalization process. In this globalized world, we can have access, in a very fast way, to news, discoveries and research that have been happening in many different places and countries. We may also have the opportunity to interact with many people from various nationalities and know more about their culture.

In terms of Brazil, the globalization process has not only influenced the health, business and economic sectors of the country, but also, and most importantly, it has had a striking impact on the educational area, especially on second and foreign language education. This is due to the fact that teachers may now integrate in their lessons some very interesting and motivating resources made available with the advances of Technology, when they or the schools in which they work afford them.

Tackling technology issues in general, we may say that if we look at the history of foreign language education, technology of a given sort has been used in the classroom for a long time. According to Singhal (2006) and Brown (2001), in the sixties and seventies, language laboratories were installed in numerous educational settings. Institutions hastened to provide the students with multiple tape-deck-equipment booths where they gathered to listen to native speakers modeling the drills of the current day's lesson. Also, in the 1980s, 1990s and still

nowadays, it is very common that teachers use tape recorders or video cassette players in their classes.

Currently, in a more modern way, due to the globalization process and consequently to the advances of technology, teachers may have the aid or support of new technologies to create a different environment for the learning process in their classes. According to some authors, some of the resources regarded as new technologies are computers, the Internet and multimedia.

The aim of this paper, then, is to discuss some of the advantages or benefits of using new technologies in the English language teaching and learning, and to comment on some of the difficulties or barriers teachers may face when using these new technologies in their classes.

Some advantages of using the new technologies in the language classroom

In this section, some of the positive points when computers are integrated in English lessons will be discussed.

In a narrow sense, when we use the computer, or one of its programs in particular, for instance, the Power Point to present the content at stake, we may say that teachers have the opportunity to call students' attention by using sounds, images, colors, different types of letters etc. Thus, it helps the students to visualize the contents in a better and more efficient way.

In a broad sense, when we refer to the possibility

of accessing the Internet in the English class, we have various positive aspects in its favor.

Firstly, we can mention Singhal (2006) who emphasizes that one of the most essential pedagogical principles of language teaching is one that underscores the study of language in a cultural context. The Internet, for this purpose, is a valuable resource. As Singhal states further, students may, for example, access current information from different countries, they may search for historical, geographical, social / cultural, economic and political information from the countries where the English language is spoken, they may read web versions of newspapers or magazines and so on. Then, "such experience can allow learners to participate in the culture of the target language, which in turn can enable them to further learn how cultural background influences one's view of the world" (Singhal, 2006).

According to the author, the students may also use the Internet to publish their works (poems, stories, essays, literary analysis etc.). In this perspective, as Singhal (2006) points out, the students not only have access to other people's work, but they may also generate their own work to be published. An example of this possibility is offered by the Project "O Ensino da Língua Inglesa" (*The English Language Teaching Project – PELI*), organized within the Letras Department of the State University of Maringá, State of Paraná, whose website (www.peli.uem.br) has a special link called *Canto do Aluno* (The Student's Corner), which consists of a place for students' productions of the sorts indicated above.

Another positive aspect highlighted by Singhal (2006) is that the students may use the Internet to search for additional language activities. These activities consist of reading tests and comprehension questions, grammar, vocabulary exercises, and so forth.

Some other authors also point out the benefits of using the Internet in the English classroom. Mike (1996) *apud* Singhal (2006), for instance, states that the use of the Internet has also been shown to promote higher order thinking skills. A language teacher, for example, may instruct learners to search for specific information. Searching the Web, according to this author, requires logic skills:

Once information has been obtained, the results must be reviewed which requires scanning, discarding, and evaluative judgment on the part of the learner. The information must be put together to make a complete and coherent whole which entails the synthesis process. Such an endeavor permits students to practice reading skills and strategies (Mike (1996) *apud* Singhal (2006)).

Lee (2006), in turn, says that it may increase student's motivation. According to this author, students feel more motivated when the range of online activities offered makes them feel more independent.

An additional positive point remarked by Lee (2006) is that the Internet provides greater interaction. First, because random access to Web pages breaks the linear flow of instruction. Also, students may communicate with or send e-mails to their classmates or to people they have never met. In addition, there are some activities in the Internet that give students positive and negative feedback by automatically correcting their on-line exercises. Finally, the author states that the Internet provides global understanding and this has implications both for language teaching and for the teacher's role: "In a world where the use of the Internet becomes more and more widespread, an English language teacher's duty is to facilitate students' access to the Web and make them feel citizens of a global classroom, practicing communication on a global level" (Lee, 2006).

Tackling a more specific issue concerning the Internet, i.e., the use of e-mail, the discussion of its benefits can be partly grounded on Paiva (2001) who points out that "the e-mail has affected human communication and opened new windows for second language acquisition".

According to the above author, several Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) researchers have reported the benefits of using e-mail in the process of learning a second / foreign language. Warschauer (1995) *apud* Paiva (2001), for example, states that exchanging e-mail provides students with an excellent opportunity for real, natural communication. By using e-mails, students may maintain contact with native speakers and students from all parts of the world.

Further, Boswood (1997) *apud* Paiva (2001) states that "conferencing via e-mail or communication with the classmates or teachers through networked computers offers many opportunities for language learning". In the same line, Windatt *et al.* (2000) *apud* Paiva (2001) explain that "as a means of communication, the Internet allows students around the world to interact with one another cheaply, quickly and reliably, opening up the classroom to the real world in a way which has never been possible".

As Paiva (2001) continues, the e-mail may be used for different learning purposes, among which are the communication with key-pals (the modern version of pen-pals or pen friends), the participation in discussion lists, the development of e-mail

projects etc.

With regard to communicating with key-pals, the exchange of student-to-student or class-to-class e-mails exemplify, according to Bosswood (1997) *apud* Paiva (2001) writing for communicative purposes, especially when the key-pals are from different cultures.

Paiva mentions Kitao and Kitao (1996) *apud* Paiva (2001) who corroborate on the benefits of communicating via e-mails by noting that

this is a good opportunity to practice English and it is also an opportunity to learn about other cultures and to share one's own culture. It is fun for students, and it is a way that they can use the English that they are learning to actually communicate. Students get excited when they receive replies to their messages, and that motivates them to study English harder.

Besides the opportunity in communicating with key-pals, Paiva (2001) emphasizes that signing up students for a discussion list and/or for e-mail services which deliver daily different kinds of texts, etc, may prove to be very beneficial for the language learning process.

As a final suggestion, Paiva (2001) points out the importance of developing e-mail projects as a resource to improve language acquisition. Students, for example, may participate in more than one project by using e-mail. Whereas a classroom may reach other classrooms on the other side of the world, intercultural projects may be the focus of joint activities and other participation actions.

After having pointed out the benefits of the use of new technologies for the English language classroom, with special emphasis on the possibilities offered by the internet, we believe that Paiva's quotation below well closes and summarizes the current section.

Electronic interaction seems to provide more natural contexts where students do not feel they are using the language to learn it, but that they are equipped with linguistic skills that enable them to communicate with people all over the world. The more they interact, the more they learn and more confident they become (Paiva, 2001, p. 261)

Some disadvantages of the use of new technologies in the language classroom

Up to this point, we have discussed some of the benefits of the new technologies in the language classroom. In this section, however, some of the disadvantages or obstacles related to their use in class will be addressed.

According to Singhal (2006), sometimes the nature of the Internet itself may be a disadvantage. When lines are busy due to excessive number of

users, it may take time to access information. Another problem mentioned by this author can be the lack of training on the part of the teachers to implement the Internet in the language classroom.

Besides, the author advises that teachers need to worry with censorship. The internet offers access to all types of issues and topics, some of which are unsuitable for children, and this lack of limits in itself may result in various problems.

According to Tognato (2001), when teachers use technology in their classes, they have to be attentive to certain aspects, such as the availability of resources, appropriate time for students and teachers to use the technology and, some kind of help from another person prepared for that end.

Corrêa (2001) also highlights other factors that teachers must be aware of when planning, for instance, a lesson that will require the use of a computer. This author states that frequently in class there will not be enough computers for all the students. Therefore, the teacher will have to make arrangements to fulfill students' curiosity and willingness to use the computer. The same author also points out that surfing the net can be fun and / or time consuming. Thus, before going to the computer lab, teachers should think about the time they will spend on a particular activity and its relevance for the learning process.

Despite the limitations and obstacles, it is clear that the internet's educational potential is immense. According to Singhal (2006), although electronic, the Internet is an entity related to literacy – people still interact with it entirely through reading and writing. For this reason alone, Singhal highlights that the Internet is a technology that will, without any doubt, have significant implications for both teaching and learning languages.

Lee (2006)'s words corroborate Singhal's in the quotation below which shows both the limitations and potentialities of the use of technology in language learning and teaching and the very results of such use in the future:

Engaging in computer-assisted language learning is a continuing challenge that requires time and commitment. Computer can / will never substitute teachers but they offer new opportunities for better language practice. They may actually make the process of language learning significantly richer and play a key role in the reform of a country's educational system. The next generation of students will feel a lot more confident with information technology than we do. As a result, they will also be able to use the Internet to communicate more effectively, practice language skills more thoroughly and solve language learning problems more easily.

Discussion and conclusion

After discussing some of the advantages and some obstacles or barriers concerning the use of new technologies in the English class, we need to be conscious that not all schools or students have access to these tools. This is especially true with regard to some public schools in Brazil where the resources available for teachers are very limited. We hope that, in the near future, the government may give special attention to the educational field, and by doing this, better equip the schools so that our students may have access to these new technologies, being better prepared, as a result, to participate for a globalized world.

While this does not happen, we believe that teachers may use the resources of technology in a different way. For example, teachers can have access to an international English newspaper or magazine through the Internet, choose one of its articles and bring it to class, so as to offer the students the opportunity to work with different genres and texts; and not only with those found/available in their textbooks.

Another activity teachers may undertake with students involves a writing one. The teacher may work with the e-mail genre and propose a kind of writing that will thus be sent to a person. When interacting with this activity the students need to have a purpose, or rather, they need to know the reason why they are writing, who the recipient is, the context of production, etc. It will be necessary that the recipient writes a reply. The teacher, then, sends the message the students wrote and when she receives a reply, she reports it to the class.

Surely these activities do not have the same impact as when the students are using the computer, but, when this is impossible, we, teachers, have to create strategies to try and minimize the distance between the students and the world around them. Thus, the activities proposed above are just some suggestions that may be too easily implemented.

To conclude the above discussed issues, it might be observed that despite some barriers or obstacles for using new technologies in the English class, we agree with some authors and researchers who point out that the advances of technology has had a great impact on language teaching and learning.

According to the texts and articles read, we see

that in the future there will be a heavy tendency to equip schools with computers, Internet, and teachers will need to be better prepared to deal with this fact.

We believe that not only being able to use the new advents of technology, but also and most importantly, having a purpose for using it in the English class, reflecting about its advantages and disadvantages, having critical attitudes and opinions about these new technologies, are some very relevant aspects that teachers should consider before implementing them in their classes. We deem it extremely important that in the teacher education process or in graduation courses, students – future teachers – have the opportunity to read, discuss and develop a critical attitude towards the issue. This is because when engaging in such discussions, teachers, and consequently their (future) students will be more prepared to deal with the challenges of a globalized world.

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