



PROSPECTS AND LIMITATIONS OF E-LEARNING FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

WILCOX ELOHO PHINA
FCE (T) Bichi

Abstract

The growing use of digital technologies in educational settings, paralleled by a paradigm change in educational theory from an instructivist transmission approach to constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, demands more adapted teacher training programs, both technical and pedagogical. Looking at factors influencing teachers' implementation of ICT in the foreign language classroom and guided by the results of a needs analysis survey conducted among twenty six language teachers from twenty five different European countries, the DOTS project aims to develop an online workspace with bite-sized learning objects for autonomous use by language professionals, particularly freelance teachers who frequently miss out on the training opportunities provided for their full-time colleagues.

Keywords: Limitations, E-Learning, English Language, Teaching, Secondary.

Introduction

Using ICT in language teaching

With the development of digital technologies over the past decades, the possibilities for learning and teaching languages have changed dramatically, and a plethora of ICT tools allow for a more learner-centred approach and an increased focus on interaction among students and between students and teachers. This links in with a paradigm change in educational theory from an instructivist transmission approach to constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning which are informed by pedagogical principles such as interaction, collaboration, learner control, and community. A report on a Europe-wide survey on the impact of ICT in teaching and learning foreign languages (Fitzpatrick and Davies, 2003) argues that this change also needs to be reflected

in changing teacher/learner roles. Yet while the use of digital technologies in educational settings has been growing and teachers increasingly use computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in their classrooms, pedagogical developments have not always kept pace with this. This is particularly true in relation to the use of interactive and collaborative Web 2.0 tools such as forums, blogs and wikis. The European Parliament and the Council of Europe recommend eight key competences for every citizen of the knowledge society (The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2006):

1. communication in the mother tongue;
2. communication in foreign languages;
3. mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
4. digital competence;
5. learning to learn;
6. social and civic competences;
7. sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
8. cultural awareness and expression. (p. 13).

Several of these competences are directly or indirectly related to language learning and the use of ICT, namely communication in the mother tongue and in foreign languages, digital and technological competence, learning to learn and intercultural and social competences.

In the preamble to the language policy of the EU languages in particular are seen as ‘a basic building block’ in the European Union’s efforts to contribute “to the development of quality education by promoting citizens’ mobility, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks, exchanging information, and through a commitment to lifelong learning”, thus enabling its citizens to take advantage of the educational opportunities created by an integrated Europe (http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/eu-language-policy/index_en.htm).

In 2009 the EU Education Council also highlighted the role that teachers have in promoting languages (http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/eu-language-policy/index_en.htm). The Lisbon strategy emphasises the need to “take steps to ensure that all the teachers involved are qualified in the use of these [new]

technologies” (http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/lisbon_strategy_en.htm). It is crucial, however, that training should go beyond the acquisition of technical skills and include the pedagogical implementation of such skills in the language classroom. As Hubbard and Levy (2006, ix) stress: “there is a need for both technical and pedagogical training in CALL, ideally integrated with one another”. In order to do this successfully, teachers first and foremost need to develop and continually enhance these competences themselves, and they need to be equipped with the skills to independently acquire new knowledge and apply this knowledge in their teaching. The need for development of teacher training is particularly pressing for freelance language teachers [1] in higher, adult, and vocational education. Language professionals in these areas often do not require a teaching qualification, and the training programmes that are available do not necessarily include the use of ICT. While there is no shortage of good online materials for online teaching of languages (e.g. <http://www.camsoftpartners.co.uk/freestuff.htm>), much effort and cost in creating online language learning material is wasted without the adequate training of teachers to use it. To ensure that both teachers and learners have access to online technologies and new ways of learning, the time-constraints of part-time staff need to be taken into account and more just-in-time training opportunities need to be developed, providing teachers with general training in the use of ICT and supporting them with specific training in online teaching and learning of languages.

Language teachers and ICT:

Institutional, social and professional constraints three major factors need to be considered in relation to language teachers’ interest and motivation in using ICTs in their classes:

- the type of institution(s) where they work
- their social status
- their self-perception as a teacher.

The type of institution

The teaching environment of a particular institution determines to what extent language teachers are expected to use ICT in their teaching and to what extent it is genuinely feasible for them to integrate online teaching into their classes.

The institutional expectations may be established within a pedagogical framework, but the successful implementation of these is dependent both on the technical environment and the institutional support provided (see Maver, this volume). On the one hand, the amount of computers and types of applications available to teachers and students are crucial points. On the other hand, institutional help in the form of ICT training programmes and pedagogical support is crucial for overcoming the anxiety and fear of some teachers concerning the use and the usefulness of online teaching (Karasavvidis, 2009). While we can still find a certain amount of institutional resistance towards online teaching, this is expected to diminish over time as new generations of teachers and students emerge, for whom the use of ICT is the norm and not the exception.

Teachers' social status

While the institutional environment plays an important role, teachers' social status often proves to be the decisive factor in integrating (more) online teaching into their classes.

Johnson (1997) states that teachers in many national contexts – some would say in most – tend to be underpaid and overworked, often operating in difficult physical and psychological conditions. The occupation of EFL/ESL teaching as a whole lacks the status of established professions such as medicine and law. Many teachers work without job security or benefits. (p. 682) Vielau (2001) describes the precarious professional situation of freelance language teachers at German adult education colleges and questions whether these institutions should expect professionalism from their freelance language teachers if they cannot guarantee any job security. The author concludes that in a rapidly changing world in which the educational sector often suffers from severe under-financing, freelance language teachers should see their status as permanent rather than transitional and consequently adopt a professional attitude towards their teaching which includes an awareness of the importance of qualifications and the quality of their work.

However, given the time and financial constraints often experienced by freelance language teachers, there are undoubtedly fewer opportunities for (self-) training and self-development in the use of ICT than for fully-employed

language teachers who have access to their institution's financial, pedagogical and technical resources.

Teachers' self-perception

In the plenary talk at the 2010 IATEFL conference, Tessa Woodward (2010) addressed the topic of "The Professional Life Cycles of Teachers". Based mainly on work by Huberman (1989), Woodward suggests that teachers pass through different stages in their professional lives and in their self-perception as teachers; stages which include experimentation and activism as well as reassessment and self-doubt. It seems that teachers who consistently invest in classroom experiments are more likely to be satisfied in later stages of their professional life cycles than their peers who focus their efforts on school-wide or district-wide activities. The implications of these findings for the purpose of this article are twofold. Firstly, the model of a professional life cycle can help language teachers to become aware of their self-perception as teachers and subsequently decide to invest in their self-development in order to actively combat disengagement and burn-out. This may well lead to more teachers experimenting with ICT in order to discover ways in which online teaching can enhance their teaching. Secondly, teacher education needs to offer different types of teacher development in the area of ICT, depending on the different stages of the professional life cycle. A novice teacher clearly needs different skills training and pedagogical support in comparison to a teacher who is in the 'stabilization' phase or in a period of self-doubt. And, we would claim, freelance language teachers also go through these stages, and teaching in an online rather than face-to-face context does not diminish the need for support and training (see Wang et al., 2010). On the contrary, it may actually require more support.

Factors influencing teachers' implementation of ICTs in the classroom

In order to develop effective training opportunities, it is important to consider why teachers initially decide whether or not to incorporate technology into their teaching. Zhao and Cziko, (2001) provide a useful framework and suggest that the following three conditions must be met in order for teachers to adopt ICTs:

1. The teacher must believe that technology can more effectively meet a higher-level goal than what has previously been used.

2. The teacher must believe that using technology will not cause disturbances to other higher-level goals that he or she thinks are more important than the one being maintained.
3. The teacher must believe that he or she has or will have sufficient ability and resources to use technology. (p. 27)

A key concept in this framework is that teachers' goals are ordered hierarchically, with some taking precedence over others in teachers' minds. Goals at the bottom of the hierarchy, or lower-level goals, are established to achieve others that are relatively higher in the scale of priorities. For instance, in order to provide students with more practice and increase their motivation regarding speaking in the L2 (i.e., a higher-level goal), a teacher might seek out a tandem partnership with a school where the target language is spoken and bring learners together via an audio or video conferencing tool (i.e., a lower-level goal). With reference to Zhao and Cziko's first condition, in order for teachers to successfully embrace ICT, they must view it as a more effective means to achieve pedagogical objectives with respect to their current teaching practice. In contrast, however, the use of technology is unlikely if it affords no significant perceived advantage over the status quo, as teachers are generally reluctant to adopt technology solely for technology's sake. Thus, it is essential that training focuses not only on how to use ICTs, but also on how they can be integrated effectively into the curriculum to convince teachers of its usefulness (Lam, 2000). As stated earlier in this article, institutional support is crucial for successful implementation of ICTs (Demetriadis et al., 2003). Thus, policymakers, as well as teachers, must be convinced of their usefulness for language learning.

In terms of Zhao and Cziko's second condition, the incorporation of ICTs to achieve one set of objectives cannot be seen as an obstacle to the attainment of other pedagogical goals perceived as more important by instructors. For example, Demetriadis et al. (2003) found that teachers were reluctant to devote class time to technology-based activities if they felt this meant less time available to prepare students for high-stakes state examinations. This finding underscores the inherent conflict faced by many teachers between the desire to incorporate innovative teaching practices and the reality of their students ultimately being assessed by traditional means. For other teachers, however,

introducing technology into the classroom represents a disturbance of another kind, namely, that it requires fundamental changes in their teaching practice, which they may be unwilling or unable to make; e.g. from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches (Zhao & Cziko, 2001; see also Büchel, this volume).

Finally, as regards Zhao and Cziko's third condition, it is important for teachers to feel confident using technology. Demetriadis et al. (2003) describe this as "having control over technology as an enabling and psychologically reassuring factor" (p. 22). In the words of one participant in a study conducted by Lam (2000):

For a teacher who has no experience with computers, it represents a great step to get into them.... If you're a teacher, you don't want to step into a classroom with something which you don't know how to work, because you look like an idiot. It's already stressful to use something in a classroom, but if you don't know [how to use it], that's adding more stress. (p. 405)

As we shall see in the following sections, the DOTS project seeks to ensure that the conditions outlined above are met and lead to the successful implementation of technology in language learning programs. One objective of the project is to provide teachers with the necessary skills in order to increase their confidence in using technology. Far more importantly, however, the project aims to demonstrate to teachers and school policymakers the affordances of ICTs in comparison to more conventional teaching approaches, and to demonstrate that the advantages implicit in their use can far outweigh the possible disturbances to current practice.

The Project: Developing Online Teaching Skills (DOTS)

In 2008 the European Council of Modern Languages (ECML) initiated 20 new projects aimed at "Empowering Language Professionals". One of these focuses specifically on the training and support of freelance language teachers in "Developing Online Teaching Skills" (DOTS). Members of the project team bring their areas of expertise from distance and adult education, vocational and teacher training, and research into online language classrooms. The project is running for four years (2008-11) and an online workspace with bite-sized learning objects for autonomous use by language professionals is being

developed. A sample learning object can be found on the ECML website (<http://dots.ecml.at/Resources/tabid/1390/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>).

The project team has chosen a Moodle platform to present their final product. The bite-sized training activities will be integrated into a workspace and they will be combined with interactive elements, for example forums, where users can exchange ideas. They will also be able to upload their own sample materials and discuss the benefits of particular online tools or specific online pedagogies. The workspace can be used independently by individual teachers engaging in self-training, which makes it ideally suited to freelance language teachers who often do not have the time or opportunity to participate in institutional training. The small size of the training elements (activities that can be completed in 30 minutes) also caters particularly for this cohort and encourages frequent, casual engagement with the training site. The learning objects themselves are divided into different levels, ranging from a basic introduction to online tools to the integration of e-learning tasks into teachers' pedagogy and teaching style. They will be presented in a searchable database allowing users to access them in different ways: users can, for example, look at a specific level of ICT skills already reached by the teacher or students or browse for different tools suitable for a particular task. They can choose their own entry level, starting at the end and checking their already available understanding of the online tool, or following a structured path taking a novice from a first description of the tool or object to full integration into their teaching. Elements of the learning object (e.g. the tool description) can be downloaded and used independently, for example to introduce a class to the new tool.

All pre-structured pathways have a self-assessment section where users can gauge their level of progress. They also contain a reflective element encouraging users to complete their self-training by observing their own classroom behaviour, reflecting on their use of the online tool and the influence online teaching has on their teaching style. Reflection can also happen collaboratively in exchanges of opinion and experience via the workspace. Finally, some learning objects will be presented in different languages, so teachers can choose to do the training in their own language.

ECML will promote the final outcomes of all projects that will be completed in 2011 during a conference in Graz, Austria. The DOTS team is planning to present not only the Moodle workspace, but also a downloadable version

available on a datastick for offline use. The DOTS workspace is currently limited only to participants, but once the project is finished the training elements will be freely available for access by individual teachers and collaborative groups of users, which means they can also be integrated into structured teacher training. While the project team has brought considerable expertise and experience to DOTS, the selection of suitable online tools for the project has not been done on this basis alone. During the first DOTS workshop, in Graz, Austria in December 2008, participants were asked to complete a needs analysis questionnaire. Their responses guided the selection of online tools for inclusion in the workspace and led to a presentation of learning objects with multiple elements to allow for flexible usage. The following section will detail the results of the needs analysis questionnaire.

DOTS needs analysis

Twenty-six participants from twenty-five different European countries took part in the first DOTS workshop where one of the main goals was the completion of a need's analysis survey on online language teaching and training needs. Twelve of the participants teach in secondary schools, six in higher education and two in primary schools. Six are teacher trainers, and one is also an education administrator. The questionnaire covered the following main areas:

- participants' prior knowledge and experience with ICTs
- benefits participants see in using new technologies for their teaching
- how these benefits relate to participants' teaching objectives
- tools participants do not currently use but which they would like to use in their teaching activities
- training in the use of tools already received by participants
- type of training still needed.

Tools

All participants had some previous experience with ICTs in their teaching, but at various levels and with different tools. Tools used by most participants (84-96%) on a daily or weekly basis are presentation tools (PowerPoint, beamers/data projectors), reference tools (electronic dictionaries), or tools to gather information and content (Internet, CDs and DVDs). In terms of communication, email is the tool most frequently used (84%). 60-65% also use

radio and TV shows on the Internet, YouTube, as well as digital audio recorders to provide and produce content for their courses. In this category of tools, Podcasts are more rarely used (50%), and iPods are used only by 19%. Interactive and collaborative tools such as chats, forums, blogs, wikis, whiteboards, are currently not an integral part of the participants' tool set (34-42%). Videoconferencing and webcam tools are only used by 23%. Course management platforms are used by a small majority of the participants (57%). 38% use the open source platform Moodle, 19% use the commercial platform WebCT. When asked to name other tools used which do not appear in the questionnaire, four participants mention the use of online quizzes, two, the free software Hot Potatoes and two, the use of Language Quest. The other tools mentioned once are: voice mail, Wimba, Smart board and Smart notebook, translation tools, e-groups, streaming videos, virtual worlds, interactive widgets, Jing, Voki, computer visualization, Flash, and the platform Dokeos. All participants gave numerous reasons for using new technologies. The most common of these is the possibility of bringing more diverse and authentic material (via Internet, YouTube, CDs, DVDs) into the classroom in order to practice listening skills and to enhance cultural awareness. Most use such material to complement lessons and to provide additional activities and exercises (developed for instance with the software Hot Potatoes), thus allowing students to work on their own and at their own pace. Participants view the use of technology in their teaching as a way of fostering individualized learning, as well as student self-reflection, autonomy and independence. Tools such as wikis, blogs, forums, chats and email are viewed by many as a means of carrying out collaborative work amongst students in the same class or students in different classes and in different countries. eTwinning Portal is a tool mentioned by one participant which allows such collaboration (see Taralova, this volume). PowerPoint, often used by participants to present lesson material, is also used as a tool for students to work collaboratively to present their own material. Collaboration, task-based learning and problem-based learning can also be fostered by using the Internet for Language Quest and WebQuest activities. Classroom management tools such as Moodle are seen as important means for organizing and distributing course content, as well as for communicating with students.

In general, Internet and multimedia technologies are perceived by most participants as a way of increasing students' motivation, as they allow teachers to design, alone or collaboratively, more stimulating lessons and more authentic learning materials. However, a few participants also note that the constraints of computer networks in some schools, such as firewalls or other security policies, can restrict access to certain software, applications and online material. One participant mentions the lack of equipment in her/his school, while another stresses the need not only to know how to use ICT applications, but also to know the school's ICT management policy. Other issues raised were the need to constantly update online material, not only to ensure accuracy but also to maintain student motivation, as well as the need for more classrooms equipped with computers.

Benefits

The three most highly rated benefits (identified by 88-96% of participants) all relate to enabling students to communicate and use the language they have learned in real contexts, outside the classroom, by being involved in real tasks and having access to authentic material. Giving students up-to-date information and enabling them to collaborate are also seen as important objectives (76-84%), whereas preparing students for exams is seen as the least important objective (although still recognized as important by 73% of participants).

When asked to name benefits other than the ones listed in the questionnaire, participants mostly identified life-long learning objectives such as enabling students to become autonomous learners, reflect on their learning, develop good learning strategies and finally, enjoy learning a new language.

These answers are consistent with the wishes participants expressed regarding ways in which the use of ICTs could lead to benefits for their teaching and for their students:

- help students become more reflective and autonomous;
- develop their critical thinking skills and computer literacy skills;
- increase motivation by offering more diverse and authentic learning resources and thus bringing the outside world into the classroom (according to one participant: "Give them access to a real audience for their language use");
- offer students more flexibility in terms of when and where to study;

- facilitate collaborative work and task-based learning.

When asked to indicate which online tools they do not use but would like to use in their teaching activities the participants say that they want to explore the following, in decreasing order of importance: Web 2.0 tools to foster learning via social interactions and collaboration; tools to create digital audio documents; course management platforms such as Moodle to organize and distribute course material and to improve communication with students. Wikis and blogs are the most frequently mentioned tools for designing collaborative and interactive learning tasks involving students within the class and students from other classes in the world. Audacity is another tool frequently mentioned by participants for creating digital audio material for online use and for enhancing oral and pronunciation skills. Podcasts and YouTube are also mentioned as tools participants would like to use more.

Training

30% of the participants are self-taught users who have received no or extremely little training in using online tools for their teaching activities. 53% have attended formal training workshops, seminars or online tutorials delivered either by their educational institutions or government agencies. The rest have acquired their skills via their peers or by collaborating in projects involving the use of online technologies. Most mention their desire to receive training on tools not previously used, but state that they would also like to be presented with an overview of existing tools so as to extend their knowledge of current online practice. Training should be hands-on, and the sharing of experiences with others is seen as an important component of any training programmes. These should consist of both online and face-to-face hands-on activities aimed at different levels of expertise, and combine technical training on the use of a tool with pedagogical considerations on how to implement this tool within the classroom. 61% state that they would want to be trained by qualified trainers. As one of the participants writes: “Only educational technologists please! No computer specialists!”

Conclusions

The situation of language teachers wanting or having to use ICT in their classes is complex. They need to acquire and constantly update their ICT skills, while also ensuring that the online teaching activities they use are fully integrated into

their own individual pedagogical framework and are thus beneficial both for their students and for themselves. In addition, they need to be aware of the resistance and difficulties their charges may face when using the technology. Finally, non-native teachers may have further difficulties in expressing themselves with ease in the target language while working in a technological context, while teachers who are native speakers may face the additional task of having to deal with a different teaching/learning culture which obliges them to confront different expectations of teacher role models and status. Scrivener (2009) states that Teaching is essentially a constant processing of options. At every point in each lesson, a teacher has a number of options available; he or she can decide to do something else, or not to do anything at all. In order to become a better teacher, it seems important to be aware of as many options as possible.

Introducing ICT into one's own teaching is currently a very significant option! Almost half the participants of our first workshop relied on non-formal learning or training to enhance their online teaching skills, either on their own initiative or with the help of colleagues and peers. Yet the wish for training from reliable sources ("qualified trainers") is also clearly a priority. Despite the small sample of our survey, it does confirm the expert team's own basic assumptions, research findings and guidelines from the European Commission: there is an urgent and widespread need for language teachers to receive systematic, pedagogically sound, and high-quality training for online teaching. We hope that the DOTS project can make its own small contribution in this area, particularly for freelance teachers, who frequently miss out on the training opportunities provided for their fulltime colleagues. Specifically, the project will offer:

- an overview of the most promising ICT tools for language teaching, with comments and instructions;
- bite-size training units for independent users and trainers;
- re-usable materials adaptable to different teaching contexts and pedagogic styles;
- a multilingual approach to self-training;
- a platform for collaboration and exchange of experiences between novices and expert users of up-to-date language teaching tools.

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