

INTRODUCTION OF MULTIMEDIA IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

It is clear that the introduction of multimedia into our classrooms, and in particular the introduction of the multimedia computer in the foreign language classroom, cannot be carried out overnight. After establishing a series of variables as the ‘setting’, with the presence or the absence of the teacher, the age of the students, and the role of the computer, we have to face the reality that, if we are going to introduce the computer and multimedia in our classroom, the teacher’s role must change. Not only the role of the foreign language teacher will have to change, but also the reticent attitude of many of our teachers towards this kind of innovation. One of the basic necessities nowadays, apart from the economic one, is the foreign language teachers’ training in Computer Assisted Language Learning.

Over the past decades the use of computers and new technologies has become an important aspect of foreign language teaching and learning. CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) and TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning) in traditional and innovative applications have enabled the language teaching community to redefine some of the strategies and concepts of teaching and learning. *The purpose* of this research is to identify the importance of multimedia in the foreign language classroom.

There are six categories of barriers that discourage the academic staff from using educational technology and that consequently will affect their attitudes:

1. *Incentives*. The fear that technology will replace them. But the fear is unfounded, since there will be always a human being on both sides of the teaching equation. What happens is that the computer located between the two human beings becomes more and more effective, when it improves both the teaching and the student’s learning abilities.

2. *Educational technology understanding.*
3. *Model of teaching.* The change in the educational system and in the teacher's role.
4. *The lack of resources access.*
5. *Technological challenges* (virus, reliability, constant changes of systems, etc.)
6. *Institutional traditions* (curriculum, staff overload, etc).

The solution would be in adequate teacher training. To be at the forefront of the new technology, the faculty will need to be trained. This training should not be in how to use certain learning packages, since they change very fast, but rather the training would be directed to the acquisition of essential skills:

- searching for specific information, on the Internet or on disks;
- evaluating which material is good, and which one is not;
- creating documents, i.e. students need to know how to publish information on the web and as well as how to create other multimedia elements;
- integrating the new technology in the teaching.

Nowadays computers offer the enormous amount of possibilities especially in the foreign language classroom because most of the information on the Internet is in English, students can contact native speakers from other countries through e-mail, a lot of didactic material exists on CD-ROM support, etc.

It is necessary to decide whether the computer will be used as a 'tutor', with a directive role (English courses on CD-ROM) or whether it will be used as a 'tool', with a nondirective role (word-processor, e-mail, dictionaries, etc). The teacher's presence will be more necessary when the computer is used as a 'tool', since the student will not be directed by the computer and at the same time he may lack the necessary skills to use such a 'tool'. We will refer mainly to the use of the computer in its role as a 'tutor' since most CALL programs are designed in this way, but even so, and as mentioned above, we do not discard the necessity, or at least the convenience, of the teacher's presence even when the computer is being used in this role.

When we speak of learning English with multimedia we have to attend to the teacher's role, since it is different from the one he plays in traditional teaching based on lectures.

It is obvious that the possibilities of the multimedia computer are numerous when it comes to learning a language; and possibly, learning through a multimedia computer most resembles real or authentic situations; but we must not forget that the language teacher has got answers the computer lacks; then, neither should we overvalue the role of the computer, nor should we set unrealistic goals that will be impossible to reach. In general terms, one could say that the ideal situation would be for the students to do 'drill and revision' exercises with the help of the computer, and for the language teacher to devote himself to activities of a more communicative type. The presence of the computer in the classroom would seem to require significant changes in the teacher's role. It is the task of CALL teachers:

- to examine the software carefully, before using it with students;
- to pay attention to individual differences among students. The advantages of multimedia systems cannot pass unnoticed. Keeping in mind that our language students have very different levels, and also that, while we are devoting our energies to the less able students, the most able ones are wasting their time, and vice versa, language teaching professionals should discover teaching methods, techniques and ideas that will qualify them to teach in an effective way in the 'mixed-ability' classes, and help the students to discover what they are capable of;
- the correct integration of the software in the curriculum, i.e. there should be a correlation between the software and what the students are studying;
- the correct elaboration of a didactic design of the several tutoring materials that the teacher will use.

Thus, the use of multimedia in the foreign language classroom can be considered as the new learning and teaching method which helps to meet the country's needs in creating an information- and knowledge-based society.

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