Turchina T.V.
Ukrainian Academy of Banking, Sumy

The Internet and Foreign language education: benefits and challenges

Over the past few years, the Internet has emerged as a prominent new technology. The influence of such a powerful technological tool has pervaded all aspects of the educational, business, and economic sectors of our world. Regardless of whether one uses the Internet or not, one must be clear about the fact that we have entered a new information age and the Internet is here to stay. Because the use of the Internet is widespread in numerous fields and domains, without a doubt, it also carries great potential for educational use, specifically second and foreign language education. In order to make effective use of new technologies, teachers must thus take a step back and focus on some basic pedagogical requirements. There are several possible reasons for using the Internet in language teaching. One rationale is found in the belief that the linguistic nature of online communication is desirable for promoting language learning. Another possible reason for using the Internet is that it creates optimal conditions for learning to write, since it provides an authentic audience for written communication. A third possible reason is that it can increase students' motivation. A fourth possible reason is the belief that learning computer skills is essential to students' future success; this reason suggests that it is not only a matter of using the Internet to learn English but also of learning English to be able to function well on the Internet.

In order to understand the role of the Internet, it would be useful to provide a brief history of technology and language teaching, present a survey of the technological resources available to second language learners, and, finally consider the role of the Internet and its possibilities. Technology and foreign language education are no stranger to one another. In the sixties and seventies language laboratories were being installed in numerous educational settings. The traditional language laboratory was comprised of a series of booths, each providing a cassette deck, and accompanying microphone and headphone. Teachers monitored their students' interactions by using a central control panel. While the language laboratory

as a positive step in linking technology and language education, it was soon recognized that such activities were both tedious and boring for learners. Furthermore, the amount of student-teacher interaction was minimal. These factors put together led to a shift to the communicative approach to second language education, namely, computer assisted language learning.

At present, there are a variety of computer applications available including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation tutors, spell checkers, electronic workbook, writing and reading programs, as well as various authoring packages to allow instructors to create their own exercises to supplement existing language courses. Computers can provide immediate feedback to students and students can work at an individualized pace. Software can be designed to include sound, graphics, video, and animation. Moreover, information is presented in a non-linear sequence enabling learners to select the exercises or concepts they wish to review.

Of course, there are many ways that Internet activities can be integrated into the overall design and goals of a course. The teacher can work with students to create research questions which are then investigated in collaboration with foreign partners. Students and long-distant partners can work collaboratively on publications. Or students can use exchange partners as experts to supply information on vocabulary, grammar, or cultural points which emerge in the class. Again, the choice has to be made by the classroom teacher, preferably in ongoing consultations with the students. Nevertheless, it does behoove the teacher to think about how to integrate online connections into the class rather than adding these communications on top of the rest classroom activities in a disconnected fashion.

The Internet has been used by some language instructors in creative ways – one of these innovations being use of electronic mail, a specific feature of the Internet. Overall, e-mail can encourage students to use computers in realistic, authentic situations in order to develop communicative and thinking skills. E-mail can also be used to communicate long-distance with language learners in other schools, or other countries. A study exploring the potential of long-distance communication involving second language learners was carried out by Chang (1993). The goals of the study

were to provide students with a real context for improving their writing, help them to expand their ideas of "content-area" reading and functional writing across cultural boundaries, make students familiar with international telecommunications, and investigate with students, the potential effects of telecommunications on literacy acquisition. Davis and Chang (1994) point out that as writers on both sides of the world shared questions and comments, jokes began to surface. Over time, the students' reading and writing began to change as well. Through surveys and informal case studies of student writing during the conference, it was found that for the most part, students' writing had improved in both fluency and organization. Surveys also indicated that students saw some carry over to their study literature, and that they had a better understanding of English usage. While the above examples illustrate a few uses of e-mail in the second and foreign language classroom, without a doubt e-mail can provide authentic communication and can foster awareness of both the language learner and the languages they are learning.

In addition to the communication benefits of the Internet, the Internet can also be used to retrieve and access information. The World Wide Web is therefore a virtual library at one's fingertips; it is readily available world of information for the language teacher. Perhaps one of the most essential pedagogical principles of language teaching is one that emphasizes the study of language in a cultural context. Many language instructors believe that language and culture are inextricable and interdependent. Understanding the culture of the target language enhances understanding of the language. E-mail on the Internet allows language learners to communicate wit native speakers. In this manner, the Internet facilitates the use of the specific language in an authentic setting. The Internet can also be used to acquire information from language resources for a variety of purposes. For example, students can access current information from countries around the world. They can obtain geographical, historical, social/cultural, economic, and political information from the countries in which the target language is spoken. Students can read web versions of daily newspapers and same-day news reports from sources such as The Economist, Financial Times. Such experiences 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.

Searching the Web requires logic skills. Once information has been obtained, the results must be reviewed which requires scanning, discarding, and evaluative judgment on 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. The Internet also promotes literacy for authentic purposes, as stated previously. In addition to being a supplement to reading materials, especially current information, when students are exploring the Net, they are essentially exploring the real world. Such browsing or exploration can also lead to incidental learning as they encounter a variety of information in this way. Communication with native speakers furthers literacy development for authentic purposes, enables language learners to compare student perspectives on an issue, and allows them to practice specific skills such as negotiating, persuading, clarifying meaning, requesting information, and engaging in true-life, authentic discussion. Promotion of literacy also occurs within a social context. The interaction that results from the above situations can lead to cooperative projects and increased communication between students from all over the world, in turn leading to the development of social skills. Finally, use of the Internet can promote computer skills and the technical and conceptual experiences of using a computer.

While the Internet and its various facets offer a great deal to the language learner, it is not without its problems. The nature of the Internet itself can be a disadvantage at times. When lines are busy due to many users, it may take time to access information or browse the Net and technical glitches themselves can lead to frustration. Lack of training and familiarity on part of the teachers can make it difficult to implement the Internet in the language classroom. This requires that school administrator's budget for training in this area. Foreign language teachers are especially anxiety prone to computers since they often have little experience with computers. For the most part, computers in schools are used for business or computer

science courses. Costs related to training, as well as on-line costs of using a provider are issues that may interfere with implementing such a technology in schools, especially in schools that have little funding. Censorship may also be a concern to language programs and instructors. The Internet offers access to all types of issues and topics, some of which are unsuitable for children, and this in itself may result in various problems. While some precautions can be taken at the present time, they are not full proof by any means. Equity issues may also present difficulties when attempting to implement such technology in the classroom. As the commercial sector begins to assume a more prominent role in the Internet's infrastructure, rural and inner-city schools, already hard-pressed to provide Internet access, may find it less affordable. This is certainly discouraging for both language teachers and students in such educational settings. Many institutions such as these may also not have the computers or computing facilities necessary to implement such type of technology.

Despite these limitations and obstacles, it must be realized that the Internet's educational potential is immense. Although electronic, the Internet is an entity related to literacy - people still interact with it entirely through reading and writing. For this reason alone, the Internet is a technology that will, without a doubt, have significant implications for both teaching and learning. So what does this imply for language teachers and learners? Teachers must become familiar with using the Internet and its various functions such as e-mail. They must also learn how to use specific search tools in order to access information, search for lesson plans, or material and ideas to supplement their lessons. Lastly, language teachers must learn now to transfer files from Internet sites to their own computer and vice versa. Obtaining information or literature on the Internet, either through the Net itself, through books, or by attending workshops and courses will further assist this process. To avoid facing the same difficulties or problems associated with use of the Internet, teachers can ask students to keep track of problems that arise during use. In essence, language teachers must take the plunge and approach the Internet as a learning experience themselves. The more enthusiastic and more knowledgeable language teachers are, the more successfully they can implement Internet in the language classroom. For the language

learner, the Internet offers a world of information available to students at the touch of a button. While it must be recognized that the Internet cannot replace the language classroom or the interaction between the language teacher and student, if offers a vast amount of information and lends itself to communication possibilities that can greatly enhance the language learning experience. Without a doubt we are in the center of a "monumental technological paradigm shift, one which will eventually change the way that all instructors teach and the way students learn" (Jensen, 1993). While technology should not take over the language classroom, it must be embraced in order to allow educators to do those things which they are unable to do themselves or those which will improve what is currently being done in the classroom. As we approach the next century, it is essential that we make informed decisions about how the Internet can be successfully integrated into the language classroom. If we as educators do not rise to the challenge - who will?

References:

1. Cononelos, T. & Oliva, M. 1993. Using computer networks to enhance foreign language/ culture education. Foreign Language Annals, 26(4), 527-534.

2. Jensen, R. 1993. The technology of the future is already here. Academe, 8-13
3. Johnson, S. 2005. Everything bad is good for you: how today's popular culture is actually making us smarter. New York: Riverhead Books.

4. Kern, R. 1995. Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and quality of language production. Modern Language Journal, 79(4), 457-476.

5. Prensky, M. 2001. Digital game-based learning. New York: McGraw-Hill.

6. Stanley, G. and Mawer, K. 2008. Language Learners & Computer Games: From Space Invaders to Second Life. TESL-EJ 11(4).

7. Warschauer, M. 1996. Comparing face-to- face and electronic communication in the second language classroom. CALICO Journal, 13(2), 7-26.