

EXPLOITING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Education has to constantly adapt and renew itself in order to be compatible with the technology-dominated world we live in. There has been heated debate over the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) in the educational process. The ICT, especially in foreign language teaching, has become the researchers' focus of attention in the last two decades. Today's armed forces require highly-skilled military personnel to be digitally literate and to have well-developed cultural awareness, intercultural communication ability and critical thinking competence. In this context, foreign language classes in the military higher education system should become an environment in which language, culture and civilisation encounters may be facilitated and enhanced by ICT, promoting the acquisition of knowledge and skills demanded by the exercise of roles that the armed forces have in the international theatres of operations. This paper aims at examining the necessity of introducing ICT in foreign language teaching, pointing to the numerous advantages of using these new technologies. The paper also discusses the new role and skills of the teacher in the context of exploiting the various resources provided by the ICT. In addition, we mention some of the modalities in which ICT can be put to good use in developing the cadets' foreign language skills.

KEYWORDS:

Information and Communication Technology (ICT), advantages, teacher's role, foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

The information and communication technology (ICT) has changed many facets of the way we live. In the last twenty years the age of digital technology has had an impact on the teaching and learning strategies employed in education. From a

very early age pupils acquire knowledge and skills in a way much more different than the one used in the past. That is the reason why foreign language teachers should integrate ICT into the educational settings of their institutions. Moreover, the shift from the traditional teacher-centred

approach, lecture-based instruction to the modern learner-centred, interactive learning environment can be achieved only by the changing roles the teacher has to assume in class. This shift results in the student's being able to use the foreign language, as well as in becoming autonomous both in class and in real-life situations.

The importance of the new role of the teacher is related to the fact that he has to think of and design effective teaching strategies and teaching and learning resources adapted to the proficiency level of the group of students he works with. The only means by which these strategies and resources can be efficient is by combining the pedagogical approaches and the teaching expertise with the benefits of the technology of the new age. Language learning is enhanced by ICT use and actually no foreign language class is to be conceived nowadays without the use of some form of technology.

Learning a foreign language undoubtedly supposes contact with that foreign language culture. Students will get a better insight into the culture of the country and people whose language they study if they are exposed to the wide variety of authentic materials, abridged and adapted by the teachers in developing the students' four basic language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing). Foreign language acquisition is no longer confined to learning grammar rules and memorizing vocabulary, but it also implies knowledge and awareness of the beliefs, customs, traditions and values of the people whose language they learn. Taking into consideration that development of language competence goes hand in hand with the intercultural competence, turning to good use the devices provided by the new technology brings many benefits to the classroom language encounters.

2. The Advantages of Using ICT in Foreign Language Teaching in Military Higher Education

Foreign language teaching and learning in the military educational system has considerably benefited from the use of the advances of the new technology. What must be emphasized is that its impact highly depends on the way it is used, the teacher's motivation and his "savoir-faire" (Isisag, 2012). Teachers should become knowledgeable in operating and managing the big umbrella of the new technological tools (Negoescu & Boștină-Bratu, 2016), from among which we need to mention: interactive whiteboards, computer, tablets, internet, videogames, smart phones, software programs for language learning, Skype messenger, blogging, television, social networks, projector, YouTube, Power Point, etc. In short, we advocate the use of ICT as a powerful tool for improving the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and learning at all levels, within the classroom didactic activities, as well as in non-educational environment (Yunus et al., 2013).

Times have changed in modern instruction, teachers have assumed new roles. Those who primarily taught and transmitted knowledge by means of textbooks, blackboard, tape recorders and audio cassettes had to get accustomed to producing slides for power point presentations, playing podcasts to practise listening skills, extracting reading passages and short stories from the internet and adapting them to develop the students' reading skills and, most importantly, allowing students to practise the language skills and complete the teacher-devised tasks through the exposure to internet-based tools. Educational technology can assist the teachers "what to teach", "how to teach", "when to teach", or how to integrate all these to the curriculum framework (Altun, 2015) of the institution they work for.

From the teacher's point of view, the use of ICT is beneficial in providing the following:

- diversifying the delivery of information and of the military knowledge by means of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic stimuli (Jurich, 2001). The transmission of knowledge is done using a native speaker as a model for pronunciation, visual images and different moving scenes that add interest to the whole process of teaching;

- drawing up their lesson plans, making them inquiry-based, project-based, or collaborative-based (Rabah, 2015). Unlike the traditional teacher, the ICT savvy instructor creates opportunities for students to produce their own military content-related questions while doing the investigation and solving problems. Throughout this process, the cadets' critical thinking is enhanced. At the same time, the team/group work ability and collaboration are developed and increased in accomplishing the projects assigned by the teacher;

- providing dynamism to classes by creating interactive didactic activities and making the lessons more enjoyable and challenging which could improve student attendance and concentration (Ciroma, 2014) on a particular piece of knowledge;

- adapting the didactic activities and tasks to each student's cognitive and emotional capacities as well as to each individual learning pace and style. The foreign language teacher's role is to design and implement differentiated and individualized tasks as well as teaching and learning resources that correspond to the students' level of language proficiency, needs, interests and motivations;

- giving instant feedback to students as they are working. Through the educational software programmes, the teacher can not only quickly notice the mistakes, but also correct them and offer the appropriate advice and individual and personalized guidance to the learners.

Modern instruction has undergone considerable changes. There are great differences in the learning process too. The foreign language learning taking place in the military educational system has been significantly influenced by the use of ICT. From the learners' point of view, ICT offers the opportunity to work independently, gaining confidence in using the language autonomously as in real life situations. Also, the quality of learning is increased through the flexibility the different digital tools can provide. From among the many advantages and benefits that the use of ICT can have on the cadets' learning, we can mention the following:

- ✓ it allows cadets a great deal of control and interactivity in acquiring and manipulating the lexical and grammatical patterns they will have to use in their daily life. The pair and group work activities devised by the teacher assist them in developing the necessary communication competence;

- ✓ it attracts learners and encourages them to focus and maintain their attention on a particular piece of information. Students employing ICT do not get bored and tend to stay on the task assigned by the teacher for a longer period of time;

- ✓ technology-based communication is a beneficial feature for language learning (Eaton, 2010). Cadets tend to be more actively engaged in discussions than in face-to-face discussions if they have to deal with authentic materials in the foreign language they learn;

- ✓ ICT develops the cadet's capacity of cooperating, communicating in solving problems and accomplishing the classrooms tasks. In this way students are prepared for life-long learning;

- ✓ multimedia educational software offers students the possibility to connect to different parts of the globe, being exposed to language and culture in a meaningful audio-visual context (Parvin & Salam, 2015). Students become aware of the ways of life of the people whose language they

are learning. Getting in contact with the customs, beliefs, values and traditions of another country, learning the foreign language turns into a cultural encounter.

3. The New Roles and Skills of the Teacher

Integrating ICT into the classroom didactic activities represents one of the biggest challenges for the teacher working in the digital world. The teacher has to assume a new role in order to implement the technology-based tools into the classroom and manage control in a different way than in a traditional class. The new generation of foreign language teachers should be good at using ICT and involved in achieving the educational objectives through technology. Teacher-oriented education is no longer motivating and challenging for learners. In learner-oriented classes, students are more interactive and the learning outcomes bring about satisfaction and enjoyment while doing the tasks. Implementing educational ICT tools implies teachers' creating more effective and efficient learning encounters through ICT. Infusing ICT into the classroom involves a shift in the role of the teacher in the new teaching and learning culture from primarily being the transmitter of knowledge and instruction to being a creator of students' learning opportunities by resorting to many sources.

Although the roles of the teachers are the same, the change supposes the performance of these specific roles via the use of information and communication technologies. The foreign language setting has to be as dynamic and multi-faceted as the society in which we live. Thus, we are of the opinion that foreign language teachers should adopt the new approaches, come to the classroom with appropriate attitudes, being now required to take on the following new roles in teaching.

The teacher as *facilitator* and *guide* must be aware of a plethora of didactic activities, methods and materials available

for improving students' language proficiency in all skills. Making use of all materials available for improving the language skills, the teacher provides students with opportunities for authentic social interactions, that can be used as models when they work together to carry out the different didactic tasks. The various means employed in teaching, such as text, audio, image, animation and surfing the net allow the teacher the creativity and flexibility to change and adjust the educational tasks to the learning level of each student. In order to help learners in developing the language skills and the social abilities, the teacher should be a participant alongside with them, as well as a guide in all the situations in which guidance is required (the use of word-processing, e-dictionaries, e-encyclopaedias, graphics and presentation slides, web browsing, blogging, tweeting on Twitter, etc.).

The teacher as *designer* has to think of the language proficiency of the students he works with and devise learning activities and tasks accordingly. The tasks must be broken down into meaningful and manageable sequences, both for the more able and the less able students. In order to be able to adapt the tasks to the particular level of the group of students, he has to research and evaluate the source materials available, as well as to set the general goal and specific objectives.

The teacher as *mediator* acts as intermediary between two cultures while teaching students the new linguistic and cultural input. The teacher can fruitfully exploit various audio-visual means to connect students to the respective foreign language-speaking countries so that they get acquainted with the values, beliefs, norms, customs and traditions of these countries. An important aspect worth underlining here is that the culture and civilization material should be presented in small, workable chunks so that the students are not overwhelmed by the great amount of information.

The teacher as *evaluator* has to select materials, instructional methodology and other ICT tools that the students will work with. Before designing the instructional strategies, the teacher has to think of and establish the evaluation methods and criteria, according to which the students' assessment will be performed at the end of semester/academic year. The traditional foreign language examinations based on multiple choice items do not indicate the students' newly acquired skills in digital literacy. Language competence and skills acquired should be assessed through linguistic portfolios which keep record of the various tasks and assignments carried out by each and every student, of the progress students have made throughout a semester/academic year. At the same time, the students themselves can become aware of their own gradual development and be able to self-evaluate their progress, as well as the resources used in this enterprise.

There are some other roles that the teacher can assume to ensure the quality of the teaching-learning-evaluation process and the appropriate integration of the ITC devices: *researcher* – the teacher must have updated expertise in modern language pedagogy and applied linguistics and know how and where to access reliable information, as well as be adept in using search engines; *collaborator* – the teacher has to share responsibilities and tasks, collaborate with colleagues in order to lighten the burden and make the effort less demanding; *orchestrator* – the teacher must have the necessary managerial skills in order to be able to provide a sound and equal participation of all the new learning environment elements (mastery of technology; adjustment of relevant learning techniques, tasks and materials to the language level of students while covering the prescribed syllabus or curriculum).

The concept “the new literacy” refers to the five competencies related to ICT that teachers need to understand and master alongside learners: *scientific*, *digital*, *critical*,

linguistic, and *cultural*. (Fitzpatrick, 2004) *Scientific literacy* relates to the ability of understanding scientific concepts and of applying a scientific perspective. *Digital literacy* represents the ability to use ICT adequately in approaching a particular subject matter (for the language teacher, web literacy for language research, the use of linguistic tools and programs for exercises and testing). *Critical literacy* constitutes the ability to judge the reliability and usefulness of any source of information. *Linguistic literacy* refers to the ability to identify the new tendencies in language use and usage and to adapt materials to the teaching situations. *Cultural literacy* relates to the implications for language teaching resulting from the observed and recorded changes in the society or societies of the target language.

The new skills required of teachers in order to function properly in the digital world we live in include: *technical skills* – teachers have to be able to cope with most problems emerging from the use of computers; *organizational skills* – teachers have to be confident in using the new media for finding the necessary resources and in integrating them adequately in the classroom; *conceptual skills* – teachers have to combine theory and practice in creating the learning encounters for students; *analytical skills* – teachers must be able to decide on the spot on the adequacy of sources their students can access to complete different tasks assigned.

4. The Use of ICT in Developing the Cadets' Foreign Language Skills

Having a good command of English has become imperative for all military personnel in the last few years. Since the armed forces of different countries work and train together, they cooperate and communicate by means of English as a common language. The modernization of the Romanian military higher education system and our country's becoming a NATO member country have turned the RO

Army into an all-volunteer professional force. Its participation in multinational operations and missions, as well in NATO meetings and summits, demand a high standard of language proficiency.

Linguistic operability is a top priority for our national defence armed forces. The language competence requirements that the officers are facing today have risen, along with the painstaking efforts they will have to take in order to meet them. In this context, the cadets' educational needs should be addressed through the design of the foreign language syllabus in terms of content and instructional strategies. Classroom training can be improved by means of ICT tools. The foreign language teachers of the Land Forces Academy of Sibiu have reorganized the teaching-learning-assessing process of the target language for specific purposes, enhancing the cadets' acquisition of the military terminology with the aid of ICT tools and helping them to become autonomous and motivated learners.

YouTube videos, one of the most common ICT tools, are used to enhance the military target vocabulary, to improve pronunciation and accent. They can also be used for improving the four language skills. In developing the ability of giving a military briefing, we start with a power point presentation of its stages and of the useful expressions they are supposed to use in real life situations, after which we expose them to authentic military terminology materials available here: 'GWT: US military briefing' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Z3eX57hrGc>) or 'Pentagon briefing' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqGHPzxEFK8>). We can also prepare worksheets on the briefing in advance and ask the cadets to complete them while watching it – a good didactic activity for improving their listening and writing skills. In order to further develop the speaking skill, cadets are required to prepare a 3-minute briefing by resorting to the internet and deliver it in front of the class.

Twitter, an online education technology tool, is used to engage students in classroom activities. The teacher can ask cadets to select a military word or phrase and tweet it around the network requesting for synonyms and antonyms of the word. When all the responses are given, the teacher can check them for accuracy and develop a link of the difficult words for reinforcing the cadets' vocabulary. Online debates can also be conducted on Twitter ('What piece of equipment is more effective, a rocket or a missile launcher?' or 'Which fighting infantry vehicle is better, the M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle or the M113 Armoured Personnel Carrier?') after the cadets have been introduced to several reading texts extracted from the internet, featuring the specifications of these machines.

Skype, a social networking application, provides tutoring or assignment help to the cadets instead of the traditional face-to-face tutorials. On coming back home, we assign them to work in pairs and write a letter to their British/American friend, who is still in the same mission in Iraq/Afghanistan. In the letter they must include the following points: general information about their country; some details about daily training activities and details about an incident during the training mission (URL: http://www.clssibiu.ro/docs/ghid_participant_new.pdf). In doing this, they develop the writing skill along with their pair-work abilities. The assignment is completed by exchanging information and collaborating with the other students of the class/academy/military institutions.

Mobile phones, a learning tool, are used in various applications. The teacher asks the cadets to produce a documentary using the camera function on their mobile phones. The only thing that the teacher assigns is the theme in the form: 'Motivation on choosing their military branch', 'Why you consider your military specialization to be the best' or

‘Presentation of our Academy to a foreign Erasmus delegation’. They are required to work in groups/teams and have the freedom to decide on the number of people interviewed, combat technique pertaining to the army branch, photos of the facilities on the post/equipment or posters taken from military web sites, as well as to the order of sequences. A writing task can naturally emerge from this activity: in a paragraph, the cadets are asked to summarize the personal reasons for choosing their military branch or to write about the facilities in our academy.

5. Conclusion

The role of technology is very significant in the foreign language teaching

process in military higher education. The many advantages and benefits provided by the use of ICT include: attracting cadets’ attention; motivating cadets through interactive activities; enriching vocabulary by watching movies with English subtitles; provision of suitable reading materials on line; development of independent work habits and confidence about using technology in meeting their own learning needs; learning while having fun.

Developing and maintaining an overall foreign language competence can be more easily achieved by exploiting ICT devices. Teachers need to consider this worthwhile resource an important asset greatly contributing to the development of the four foreign language skills.

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