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MULTIMEDIA TECHNOLOGY AS MEANS OF BUILDING LIFE SKILLS IN ROMANIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

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Abstract: *The wide range of technological devices available today have clearly influenced the structure of the typical English lesson and have created new roles for the teachers and the learners of this foreign language. Starting from the case of the Romanians learners of English, the paper presents a theoretical and research approach to the manner in which multimedia technology can positively influence the development of the students' life skills, drawing attention, at the same time, to the situations when important skills are better built and fostered by means of other teaching strategies.*
Keywords: *educational technology, life skills, teaching English, technological devices*

1. Introduction

In a world which is constantly changing and growing, the role of school as one of the fundamental pillars on which a quality life is built proves to be quite difficult to fulfil sometimes. This is the reason why, in certain countries – and Romania is certainly one of them – the public space is fraught with complaints and accusations against educational institutions, basically claiming that they form people with reduced sensitivity to social needs, people who, beyond the theoretical knowledge baggage, do not possess satisfactory practical skills, people who do not know how to face social requirements, or are not quite able to function independently in nowadays life.

What must school actually do in order to properly perform the crucial role it has been assigned by the society? I consider that an answer in this respect is that, beyond the acquisition of knowledge and competences specific to various subjects, in accordance with the agreed curricula, school should also offer learners the opportunity of developing a number of skills which are regarded as essential for the 21st century, from decision making and problem solving to developing self-awareness or building strong interpersonal relationships. In other words, educational institutions of various types should provide a set of functional life skills which the current student and the future adult can apply on a daily basis, whether at school, at work or in their personal lives.

In their attempt to offer their students a learning experience which is both relevant and motivating, teachers – and I will refer mainly to the teachers of English – often resort to the various possibilities provided by the modern technology. Beyond the fact that it creates premises for an engaging and stimulating learning experience, educational technology undoubtedly contributes to the improvement of a series of skills that help students deal effectively with the varying and the ever changing challenges of the modern world: problem solving, creativity, adapting communication to a wide range of contexts, etc. However, even the teachers who resort to technological devices on a regular basis point to the fact that there are situations when such devices may prevent students from developing a series of emotional and social skills that are extremely important for success at professional and personal level.

Acknowledging the positive influence which multimedia technology can exert on the development of the English learners' life skills, this paper aims at revealing "the other side of the story" as well. In other words, after presenting the benefits normally associated with the use of technology in the context of teaching in general, and that of teaching English in particular, the paper will discuss some of the negative effects that it might produce, taking into account research evidence as it was offered by a group of Romanian teachers of English who frequently integrate technology in the teaching-learning process.

2. Life skills and the their development by means of multimedia technology

The most widely used definition of life skills is that offered by the World Health Organization, which describes them as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO 1997). In other words, life skills represent psycho-social and interpersonal competency which helps people face the realities of a challenging world. Even if the concept of life skills is considered to be elastic in nature, as its meaning is greatly dependent on the culture and even on the situation, it is widely agreed that it covers generic skills like decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, empathy, coping with stress and emotions (WHO 1997, UNICEF 2000). People who are able to understand and use these skills, along with their educational qualifications, will be better placed to take advantage of educational and employment opportunities.

In the field of education, integrating life skills into everyday teaching was seen as a solution to the problem of finding ways in which students can be really prepared for the constant challenges that lie ahead them in a fast-changing world. No one can be sure about the characteristics of the labour market or, in general, of the society in which the present-day students will function in five – ten years down the line. This is the reason why, students must be equipped with the types of skills that are likely to enable them to adapt to a wide range of situations they may be faced with during their future personal and professional life.

Discussing the problem of life skills development in the context of teaching English as a foreign language, I consider that the English teachers enjoy a special status in this respect. This special status is actually determined by the essential role played by English as the language of international communication, and, in close connection to that, by the fact that, almost anywhere in the world, knowing English is perceived as a key factor for a better career and for a higher position in the society. This situation puts an extra strain on the teachers of this foreign language, who are expected to help their students acquire the competence which makes them communicate effectively in English as global citizens of a multicultural world.

A similar idea is expressed by Steve Taylore- Knowles, who has been involved in the field of ELT for about twenty years, as a teacher, examiner and textbook writer. On the Macmillan English site, Taylore-Knowles discusses the particular responsibility that English teachers have when it comes to life skills. He explains that, first of all, many of the essential life skills and sub-skills have to do with the sphere of communication, no matter if we refer to persuading others, reaching a compromise or functioning as a team member. This is in line with the main purpose of English teaching, which should be that of developing the students' communication skills, beyond filling them with words and all types of rules. Secondly, for many life skills, there are particular forms of expression in English, which are most likely to differ from the appropriate forms in a student's native language. This means that an important condition for developing the students' communicative skills is to help them learn the precise ways in which they can perform various functions in English. Taylore-Knowles' conclusion is that English teachers should try to activate their students' language in ways which constantly contribute to the development of the life skills, thus helping the learners prepare for the fast-changing world they live in (http://www.macmillanenglish.com/life-skills/why-should-we-teach-life-skills/).

Most English teachers are aware of their responsibility, and they frequently resort to technology in an attempt to help students draw links between what is happening inside the classroom and what is happening in the outside world. The reason why teachers in general use technology within the classroom is that it represents an efficient instrument of modelling real-world practices. The benefits are unquestionable and there are numerous studies focussed on the advantages of using technology in classroom instruction. I will briefly discuss some examples in this respect.

Increasing students' motivation is considered to be one of the main benefits of using technology in the classroom (cf. Heafner 2004, Granito and Chernobilsky 2012). Because of their familiarity with the various technological gadgets, students are very likely to respond positively to any type of technology-infused activity. In close connection to its role as motivator, technology is also considered to exert a positive influence on the students' self-confidence, and, implicitly, on their self-reliance (Alshahrani, Ward and Walker 2013). By allowing the students to access and manage information from various on-line sources, the teacher makes them more responsible for their own learning, and, in this way, the students' academic self-confidence increases. The increased confidence in their own academic abilities determines, in its turn, the students to be more self-reliant learners.

In addition to skills pertaining to the affective domain, the application of the educational technology is also regarded as an enhancer of the learners' cognitive characteristics (cf. Zolfaghari Mashhadi and Reza Kargozari 2011, Thaiposri and Wannapiroon 2015, Stošić 2015). The wide range of technological devices available today ensure that students have access to individual, even personalized learning environments, and provide real-life applications of the problems discussed during the classes. By actively engaging students in the learning process and by offering them opportunities of connecting theoretical ideas to everyday experiences, educational technology contributes to the development of higher order thinking skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving. Additionally, not to be overlooked are the immediate practical skills fostered by the students' digital experience, from evaluating the multitude of sources available on-line, to writing various types of e-mails, or creating a presentation.

I definitely agree with the opinions expressed by the teachers and the methodologists who present the advantages of integrating technology within the instructional process. However, as I pointed out in the introductory section of this paper, my intention is to offer a complete picture of the situation, and, consequently, in what follows, I will focus on some of the negative effects that the use of the various technological devices might bring about.

3. Some negative effects of technology on the students' life skills: a research study among Romanian teachers of English

The English teachers in our country, too, are very well aware of the benefits presented by the use of educational technology. This is the reason why, teachers of all ages resort – more or less regularly – to the various technological devices that are available to them. In my position as a teacher trainer, being involved in the pre-service teachers' practicum and the in-service teachers' upgrading programmes, I have attended hundreds of lessons in which technology was used and seemed to produce a wide range of positive effects on both the teacher's and the students' side. I want to particularly mention the case of a young English teacher who works in a small school in a village near Timisoara, and whose classes were very much focussed on the use of laptops, video projectors, smartphones, and video cameras. When I congratulated him for the effort he was making and for the good results that technology produced in the case of his students, I was somehow surprised when he told me: "Yes, it is very useful, but only as far as you handle it with care. Even if it works wonders in case of the content that I intend to teach, the use of technology may be problematic for the pupils' development as human beings."

In fact, these words can be considered to represent the starting point of the present research: I realised that using educational technology is not only about more relaxed teachers and

more motivated students, but it also presents some disadvantages. Consequently, I initiated a research study focussed on the manner in which educational technology may negatively influence the English students' life skills. My subjects were 30 Romanian teachers of English who are known for their openness to integrating technology in the instruction process. The data collection instrument was represented by the individual interview. Since my intention was not to make statistics, but just to identify and to describe a certain reality, the data provided by my subjects was analysed by means of qualitative research methods.

The interpretation of the information provided by my subjects has led to the identification of 6 categories of life skills and sub-skills that run the risk of being negatively affected by the use of technology as teaching aid. The categories in question are described in what follows.

3.1. Concentration and focus on the task

A first problematic aspect that my subjects noticed with regard to the technology-based instruction refers to the students' difficulty to stay focused for a long time during the activities. In these teachers' opinion, the fact that students generally use computers or mobile phones primarily for games makes them associate modern technology with game playing.

One of my subjects explained: "My opinion is that the over-use of modern technology (especially smartphone) is to be blamed for that. They are concentrated on trivial things on their phones (discussions, photos, videos), all of them becoming unimportant in a few seconds, and everything else seem too difficult and useless."

One conclusion that arises here is that, in spite of the students' obvious willingness to get involved in a lesson which integrates some type of gadgetry, teachers do not always achieve the intended learning objectives. This happens because most of the students nowadays have become dependent on the rapid flow of information and the constant stimulation specific to the virtual environment, elements which do not always fit the context of a classroom learning situation. Well planned activities, clear instructions to the students, as well as an effective procedure for monitoring both the progress of the activity and its result might be solutions for overcoming this problem.

3.2. Confidence in their own mind abilities

It is obvious that the students' exposure to technology has produced changes in the traditional learning habits. Computers and the Internet make it is so easy for anyone to find all sorts of answers that students do not even need to make so much effort looking for them. One consequence noted by my subjects is that learners tend to rely more on the Internet than on their own memory and brain. One teacher complained in this respect: "They always need to look for something on the Internet, rather than trying to remember things, rules or information. Nothing is worth memorizing or studying as long as we can find it on the Internet, they think."

This situation is likely to produce some immediate negative effects, which are reflected by the students' inadequate preparation for the course, and, most probably, by the grades they receive. But, as the teachers that I interviewed pointed out, the real problem is that the over-reliance on technology may have various long-term negative consequences on the part of the students, such as the acquisition of poor study habits, or the development of a lazy attitude towards their education and personal development. What teachers can do in order to counterfeit such negative effects is to adopt a balanced approach, in which technology supports and completes the traditional aids and methods, without necessarily taking precedence over them.

3.3. Analytical competence

In close connection to the pitfall mentioned above, there is the risk of a decreased ability to use knowledge and information in order to assess potential problems and to solve them effectively. As most of my subjects pointed out, even in the case of simple homework or tasks, students tend to look for ready-made solutions offered by their computers and smartphones.

Instead of going through the long process of analysing the problem, considering potential alternatives, implementing a plan and assessing its effectiveness, pupils often rush into action by choosing the first solution offered by Google or by other search engines. One teacher complained that, "in this way, much of the initial objective of the technology-based activity is ruined, and, moreover, it runs the risk of creating premises for teaching my pupils some bad habits."

It seems, therefore, that skills like critical thinking or problem solving can be undermined by the inappropriate use of the media technology. My subjects' opinion is actually supported by similar findings coming from the field of research into the effects of technology (e.g. Carr 2010, Hiltner 2015), according to which the overwhelming presence of the Internet as part of our everyday life has a negative influence on our deep-brain thinking, and, consequently, on the manner in which we process and interpret information.

3.4. Honesty

Unfortunately, the specific working conditions of the technology-based instruction has also created, in some of the students, the impression that it is easier to cheat. My subjects referred to two types of cheating. On the one hand, since the Internet provides easy information at a very high speed, the temptation to click "copy/paste" and take sentences or paragraphs from a Webpage without acknowledging the source is great. On the other hand, students can easily send photos of their work to other colleagues, and this might create an atmosphere of distrust in the classroom.

It is possible that students cheat during the technology-assisted activities simply because they are not aware of the standards that they are supposed to meet from this point of view. Therefore, teachers should try to prevent this by making sure that students understand, from the very beginning, what electronic cheating is and what consequences it might have. Additionally, the manner in which the teacher prepares and monitors the students' digital work is also essential. Designing tasks whose completion involves the student's personal experience, or evaluating the students' work at various stages of its progress are just a few of the strategies that teachers can use in order to deal with this problem.

3.5. Team spirit

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, technology is often used when learners are involved in various types of teamwork projects. Teamwork activities are expected to make students cooperate with the group in order to achieve a specific goal. But it seems that this function of teamwork, that of facilitating collaboration between the various group members, is not always served. One of the teachers I interviewed explained: "How it all frequently ends up is having two or three students in the group who do most of the hard work, while others take advantage of the situation and relax. What do these students learn from such an experience? That, in life, you can do just fine as long as you find someone to do things for you!"

The problem signalled by my subjects is actually that computer-based teamwork projects do not always achieve their twofold role, that is, on the one hand, to benefit the group as a whole, and, on the other, to contribute to the personal development of the students involved. Just as I pointed out in the case of honesty, the way in which the students' work is organized and monitored is essential for its success. In other words, before the activity begins, the teacher must explain the task and the stages of the project, and, at the same time, must assign clear roles within each group. As the activity proceeds, the teacher must guide the group, offering help when necessary, and making sure that students both perform their individual duties and collaborate towards the fulfilment of the common task.

3.6. Face-to-face communication skills

Last but not least, my subjects refer to the negative effects that the use of the various modern technological devices might exert on the students' interpersonal skills. This harmful

effect of technology has already come to light in today's world, being constantly emphasized by the psychological and educational research (e.g. Przybylski and Weinstein 2013, Drago 2015, etc.). People tend to spend more time attached to their screens than interacting with real persons around them, and this affects the quality of their face-to-face relationships.

This problem was also mentioned by the teachers I interviewed. One of them explained: "During the past few years, I have noticed many students who have no problems communicating on-line, and manage quite well in tasks which require the use of the Internet, but who prove to have a poor performance when it comes to all sorts of oral communicative activities. Maybe there is a certain degree of shyness involved, but I think that the real problem is that they do not feel so comfortable with the face-to-face type of interaction."

Even if social media helps people connect to one another, the style of human communication has changed, promoting a mediated type of interaction to the detriment of the direct one. It is obvious that teachers have no control over the amount of time spent by their students in the company of a gadget outside the classroom. Therefore, what English teachers – and foreign language teachers in general – can do is to involve students in classroom activities which offer opportunities of practising the "rules" of face-to-face communication, from role-playing and conflict resolution, to information gap and debates.

4. Conclusions

It is undeniable that, when multimedia technology is exploited to its potential and with purpose in the classroom, it can provide students with a range of skills that would benefit them in the everyday life. However, as the results of my research study clearly indicate, the dangers with which the use of the various technological devices may be associated are not to be underestimated. In this technology-dominated world, the role of the teacher does not lose any of its prominence, but unavoidably undergoes certain changes. Referring to this aspect, Gilakjani (2013) points out that teachers should move from the role of dispensers of knowledge to that of facilitators, who motivate students in becoming active learners.

It can be concluded that technology itself is insufficient as a solution: it is useful as far as it amplifies the impact of good teaching, but it does not fix bad teaching. It all depends on the manner in which technology is integrated into the teaching-learning process, and here the teacher plays an essential part. Any person can learn to use a search engine or a social network, but constructing a solid argument, no matter if it is under the form of an essay, an e-mail message or a PowerPoint presentation, requires good thinking and communication skills. Such skills might be facilitated by technology, but they hardly require technology to acquire.

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