

Teaching English Language and Benefiting From Computer Usages

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Abstract: Computers have made a remarkable entrance into language education in the past decade, and no one would deny that they have brought significant benefits to teachers and students. However, an uncritical use of computers can be just as disadvantageous to students as a refusal to have anything to do with them. This article discusses some of the ways that computers can be used in English language teaching, with a view to help teachers make the most of the opportunities they offer to EFL students. It is helpful to think of the computer as having the following main roles in the language classroom: As a teacher, tester, tool, data source and communication facilitator.

Keywords: Teaching English; Benefiting; Computer Usages

Introduction

Computers assisted language learning has generated enormous interest among researchers and practitioners with the potential of computers in learning and teaching second/foreign languages. Various kinds of approaches to its development and use have been attempted by language teachers, including English as second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) teachers. While they have expanded their views through a number of research studies on the effectiveness of computers in language teaching, they have tried to investigate specific ways that provides better learning and facilitates the learning process. In terms of research activities, the links between computers usages and second/foreign language classroom research have been reinforced (Chapelle, 1996, 1997; Conrad, 1996). In this respect, Doughty (1987) emphasizes the importance of classroom data in computer assisted contexts, and Johnson (1991) proposes to expand computer assisted contexts research to social interactional environments of the classroom. Empirical research into computer assisted classroom practice would help researchers understand the environmental aspects of CALL activities and the fundamental roles that computers can play in English language teaching classes. In this study the five important roles that computers could play in an ELT class are discussed that is computers are viewed as a teacher, as a tester, as a tool, as a data source and finally as a communication facilitator

I. Computer as teacher.

In the early days of computers and programmed learning, some students sat at a terminal for extended periods

following an individualized learning program. Although we have come a long way from the rather naïve thought, held by some at that time, that the computer could eventually come to replace the teacher, there has been a return to a much more sophisticated kind of computerized teaching using multimedia CD ROMS. In such programs, students can listen to dialogues or watch video clips. They can click on pictures to call up the names of the objects they see. They can speak into the microphone and immediately hear a recording of what they have said. The program can keep a record of their progress, e.g. the vocabulary learned, and offer remedial help if necessary. Many of these CD ROM programs are offered as complete language courses. They require students to spend hours on their own in front of the computer screen, usually attached to a microphone headset. For this reason alone I prefer not to use them in my language teaching. Another of their serious drawbacks, in my view, is the fact that in many cases the course content and sequence is fixed. The teacher has no chance to include materials that are of interest and importance to the particular students in his or her class.

As an alternative to large CD ROM packages, there is an increasing number of useful sites on the World Wide Web, where students can get instruction and practice in language skills such as reading, listening and writing.

II. Computer as a tester.

The computer is very good at what is known as drill and practice; it will tirelessly present the learner with questions and announce if the answer is right or wrong. In its primitive manifestations in this particular role in language teaching, it has been rightly criticised. The main reason for the criticism is simple: many early drill and practice

programs were very unsophisticated; either multiple-choice or demanding a single word answer. They were not programmed to accept varying input and the only feedback they gave was Right or Wrong. So for example, if the computer expected the answer "does not" and the student typed "doesn't" or " doesnot" or " does not ", she would have been told she was wrong without any further comment. It is not surprising that such programs gave computers a bad name with many language teachers. Unfortunately, there are now very many of these primitive drill and kill programs flooding the Internet.

Despite their obvious disadvantages, such programs are nevertheless popular with many students. This is probably because the student is in full control, the computer is extremely patient and gives private, unthreatening feedback. Most programs also keep the score and have cute animations and sounds, which many students like.

There are some programs which do offer more useful feedback than right or wrong, or that can accept varying input. Such programs blur the role of the computer as teacher or tester and can be recommended to students who enjoy learning grammar or vocabulary in this way. If two or more students sit at the same computer, then they can generate a fair amount of authentic communication while discussing the answers together.

III. Computer as a tool.

It is in this area that I think the computer has been an unequivocal success in language teaching. Spreadsheets, databases, presentation slide generators, concordancers and web page producers all have their place in the language classroom, particularly in one where the main curricular focus is task-based or project-work. But in my opinion, by far the most important role of the computer in the language classroom is its use as a writing tool. It has played a significant part in the introduction of the writing process, by allowing students easily to produce multiple drafts of the same piece of work.. Students with messy handwriting can now do a piece of work to be proud of, and those with poor spelling skills can, after sufficient training in using the spell check, produce a piece of writing largely free of spelling mistakes.

IV. Computer as a data source.

I'm sure I don't need to say much about the Internet as a provider of information. Anyone who has done a search on the World Wide Web will know that there is already more information out there than an individual could process in hundred lifetimes, and the amount is growing by the second. This huge source of information is an indispensable resource for much project work, but there are serious negative implications. I shudder to think of how much time has been wasted and will continue to be wasted by students who aimlessly wander the Web with no particular aim in mind and with little or no guidance. I generally do not turn my students free to search the web for information. Instead,

I find a few useful sites beforehand and tell the students to start there; anyone who finishes the task in hand can then be let loose!

As an alternative to the Web, there are very many CD ROMs, e.g. encyclopedias, that present information in a more compact, reliable and easily accessible form.

V. Computer as communication facilitator.

The Internet is the principal medium by which students can communicate with others at a distance, (e.g. by e-mail or by participating in discussion forums). In fact at Frankfurt International School the single most popular use of computers by students in their free time is to write e-mails to their friends. Some teachers have set up joint projects with a school in another location and others encourage students to take part in discussion groups. There is no doubt that such activities are motivating for students and allow them to participate in many authentic language tasks. However, cautious teachers may wish to closely supervise their students' messages. Recent research has shown up the extremely primitive quality of much of the language used in electronic exchanges!

VI. Conclusion

Computers in education have been disparaged as: Answers in search of a problem. And certainly many computer activities of dubious pedagogical value have been devised in the past simply to justify the existence of an expensive computer in the classroom. Nowadays, however, I think it is much more clearly understood that the computer can play a useful part in the language class only if the teacher first asks: What is it that I want my students to learn today, and what is the best way for them to learn it? In most cases, the answer will probably not involve the computer, but there will be occasions when the computer is the most suitable and, for the students, most enjoyable way to get the job done. For the integration of computers into a specific language teaching environment, it is critical to look at the ways which contribute to the implementation of computer assisted activities that enhance the effectiveness of teaching and consequently leads in better language learning.

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