The Potential Role of ICT in Modern Foreign Languages Learning 5-19

A discussion paper

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KEY AREAS FOR ICT APPLICATION IN MFL TEACHING AND LEARNING

There is no one best way to learn a foreign language nor a single optimal set of teaching materials. This is because learners will vary both in how they learn and what they need and want to learn. It follows therefore, that there is no single 'magic bullet' that can be offered by ICTs to support language learning for all pupils and across all ages (see the Futurelab Literature Review in Languages, Technology & Learning by Jim Milton for further discussion of this position).

However, looking at the current provision of language teaching, and at the future languages strategy, there are a number of key roles that ICTs have the potential to fulfil in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teaching and learning:

1. Increasing motivation to learn languages.

2. Enabling language learning across institutions and outside formal educational contexts.

3. Offering opportunities for meaningful practice of language in authentic contexts.

4. Offering opportunities for maximal progress in language acquisition through responsive diagnostic and feedback systems.

5. Providing innovative language engineering devices which provide just-in-time support in language use.

6. Enabling information and resource sharing between MFL teachers.

These aspects of ICT respond to three key issues in MFL teaching: first, the need to ensure that learning MFLs is seen as relevant and enjoyable to learners; second, the need to offer more opportunities for learners to practice using MFLs; and third, the need to support language teachers, particularly at primary level, in rural areas or teachers working in less popular languages.

To expand on these points, ICTs can be seen to offer a number of features that are currently in demand from the language teaching and learning communities.

1. Motivation
ICTs, through games and other digital media, through offering 'real and relevant' opportunities for linking with real language learners (through the internet/video-conferencing), through providing access to relevant and engaging materials (through access to foreign language entertainment and information sources), can provide increased motivation for learners of all ages to acquire and use languages.

2. Learning across and outside institutions
Through video and e-mail links with schools in other countries, ICTs can offer real opportunities to use languages with native speakers; through personalised and mobile devices, and through home access to the internet, ICTs can offer learners the opportunity to practise languages outside the languages classroom.

3. Meaningful practise of language in context
Before the arrival of the internet, e-mail and video-conferencing, the only way of practising language in context was through expensive school visits or through the telephone. ICTs offer opportunities for practising language in context with real native speakers in all four skills areas (reading, writing, listening and speaking) in ways that would have been impossible before.

4. Effective practise and progress
Languages may be one of the only areas in which the Computer Assisted Learning Paradigm is

still acknowledged as being of some merit, as the aspects of progressive language acquisition key to language learning can be practised through drill and test systems. These enable learners to practise languages in an environment free from embarrassment where they can work at their own pace. These environments also offer instant feedback on success, diagnostic testing of abilities and encourage learners to manage their own learning.

5. Language engineering is beginning to provide useful applications
Portable devices now can support dictionaries, pronunciation (speaking dictionaries), context-specific phrase books and so on. Professional translators use corpora and translation memories (a professional's equivalent of the vocab book). Machine translation, whilst not perfect, is becoming more sophisticated. How these tools influence the ways we go about using a foreign language and support our acquisition of mastery of that language need investigating. Mathematics has changed from using slide rules and log tables - should MFL change? These tools may increase confidence.

6. Information and resource-sharing between MFL teachers
The internet can function as a powerful tool for language teachers; by enabling them to create and share their own resources and models of good practice, by creating databanks of games and tests that can be used by other teachers, and by offering lists of MFL resources in target languages that can be shared. Examples of this sort of activity in practice can be found particularly at the Sir Bernard Lovell School Online MFL & ICT resource centre, at Shirelands Languages College and at the CILT website.

To achieve all of the above activities without access to ICTs is not only difficult, but highly costly, and has, historically, tended to exclude all but children culturally and socially predispositioned towards language learning.

SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES AT KEY STAGES

The following is a summary of the types of ICT-based activities we might expect to see across the Key Stages over the next few years:

Key Stage 1

In Key Stage 1 (and at early years), the emphasis is likely to be on using ICTs to enable playful interactions with words and sounds in order to encourage enjoyment of 'playing' with other languages, and familiarity with the sounds of other languages. Songs, rhythm and patterns are likely to play a significant role at this stage. The Sesame Street/Teletubbies approach, for example, is likely to be important. Digital resources at this age are likely to encourage play, singing along with sounds, repetition of sounds, and basic association of words with familiar objects. See for example, the Jump Ahead series or the Kid-net development. The MFL teaching community is at the forefront of creating game-based learning for language acquisition, and we are likely to see primary teachers sharing basic puzzles and games via the internet that can be repurposed for individual classes. Looking further into the future, we are likely to see a development of object-based play resources and intelligent responsive toys for language learning, such as the SkyBluePink Box developed at Futurelab, which enables young children to play with physical objects while acquiring basic vocabulary. Looking even further ahead, we are likely to see play-based resources that enable children to input through voice as well as through written text, and which will document children's progress providing adaptive responses to their progress.

Key Stage 2

At Key Stage 2, we are likely to see a continuation of these play-based activities. In addition to these, ICTs can be used to introduce the important notions of context, culture and relevance of

languges to a real world in which languages are spoken and used for leisure, work, arts and business. The internet can be used to explore other cultures through access to authentic written materials via the web. Similarly, DVDs will allow teachers access to entertainment resources (music videos, films, television, computer games) to enable learners to gain familiarity with use of language in a variety of different contexts. These DVD resources, particularly if we consider foreign language songs, have certain natural advantages; they are highly loaded with vocabulary and structures, repetition is inbuilt, language structures are embedded in meaningful phrases and the music is thought to be an aid to memory. The shift from cassettes and videos to CDs and DVDs offers a number of advantages - from in-built subtitling, to supplementary materials, to the ability to rewind and freeze-frame easily, making them much more user-friendly in the classroom. Looking further ahead, within the next five years, it is possible that broadband connectivity will enable the sharing and use of rich media resources via the internet, which again should enable teachers to develop banks of resources that can be manipulated and personalised to meet the needs of particular classrooms and children.

With careful planning, and due attention to child protection policies, it is also possible at this stage to begin to introduce e-mail communication and online chat between children in the UK and children in other countries. There are some major barriers to this, not least the need to coordinate timetables (for real-time chat), although the asynchronous nature of e-mail communication overcomes some of these difficulties. An example of this type of activity is of links established by a UK primary school between children in the UK and children in Japan, who exchange digital images of themselves to overcome language barriers; in a digital form of 'consequences', UK children send digital photos of themselves, these are then playfully manipulated by the Japanese children and returned to the UK children. This early work is as much about building interest in other countries and other cultures as it is about language acquisition, and goes to the heart of the need to encourage language learning as a relevant real-world activity. These early activities can encourage children to begin to want to develop language skills. See Luckwell Primary School, Bristol, for examples of this work. The EU has also funded the VIRLAN network enabling children to communicate via the internet through written language and through shared creation of drawings.

Key Stage 3

This has traditionally been the age at which children in the UK first begin to learn a foreign language. With current plans for languages provision at primary level, however, this will no longer be the case. This opens up the danger that languages will become, as with many other subjects, subject to the Key Stage 3 'slump' in performance and engagement. With that in mind, there is a case for arguing that the best examples of language teaching at this stage will be those that maintain interest and enthusiasm for the subject. This could be seen taking various forms.

First, through enabling learners to be aware of and monitor their own progress through rapid and low-stakes self-assessment. The motivational impact of being able to identify progress as language learning becomes more complex (the shift to the more murky depths of German grammar for example) is likely to be significant. One example of these sorts of low-stakes standardised tests administered online and marked by computer is the DIALANG project. Second, through the use of authentic and engaging materials, as discussed in the previous section, access to popular music, video and other entertainment resources is likely to encourage student engagement. Third, whole class teaching using language games on whiteboards with multiple input devices can prove engaging and enable teachers to bring all learners up to similar levels of expertise. Fourth, what might be of most benefit to this age group is the possibility of communicating with 'real' speakers of the target language through video-conferencing and internet communications.

At present, the technology in most schools is insufficiently robust to ensure that teachers will feel confident establishing video-conferencing as part of regular school activities - this is

something that is likely to be seen more as a special event, perhaps organised via City Learning Centres, or Specialist Languages Colleges, where large groups of children could gather to interview important figures from other countries in the target language. Or, as is the case with projects such as the Global Nomads Group, or the Shei-Ra Foundation activities, where specialised video-conferences are set up to allow children to speak to others of the same age in countries where major events are taking place (recent link-ups between Baghdad and New York, for example, have demonstrated that this can be done). Whatever the focus for these events, their aim is likely to be to demonstrate the usefulness and relevance of languages learning; to act as a stimulus for research and preparation activities; and their practical implementation is likely to be in partnership with specialist facilities.

The internet as a non-verbal communications media is more easily used to enable communications between children in different countries. This needs to be carefully established to ensure that UK children are not, however, only ever speaking English and to ensure that child protection remains achievable. E-mail 'pen pal' schemes can be set up, and encouraged as both formal classroom and out-of-school activities. The EU ALTE network set up a European online community for secondary schools. Futurelab is currently working on a game that scaffolds language learners in Spain and England to play a collaborative game across the internet.

Many of these activities could benefit from exploration of the use of language engineering tools and learning to undertake things like translation with the support of software etc.

Key Stage 4 and post-16 (14-19)

Given the changing emphasis in the UK National Curriculum away from languages as a mandatory GCSE-level subject, and the introduction of the NVRS for languages, Key Stage 4 and post-16 language learning is likely to take a number of different forms, in which self-directed and distance learning may play a significant role. Some children will continue to take mainstream European languages as a GCSE or A-level subject, in which case, teacher-supported learning will continue to be important, and the full raft of internet resources, entertainment resources and formally mediated internet communications with speakers of target languages outlined above will need to be encouraged.

With the advent of the NVRS, however, many children may opt for a more specialised form of language learning that focuses, for example, on one or two of the four languages skills, for example, speaking and listening, if the main emphasis is on tourist uses of the language; or reading and writing, if the main emphasis is on business applications in the workplace. At the same time, children will be given the opportunity to gain preliminary levels of competence in less mainstream languages, for example, breakthrough-level Japanese, or preliminary Chinese. These learners are likely to be learning without the benefit of a community of learners in their school and are likely to be driven less by 'academic results' than rapid and identifiable progress in their chosen skills areas. As a result, online diagnostic testing and rapid feedback managed by the learners themselves are likely to be significant. DfES and QCA are both, at present, working on developing online summative assessment tools for the NVRS for languages; what is needed, however, is an easily available self-assessment tool for language learners. At present, these are not readily available in all the specialist languages likely to be in demand. We would also expect to see young people using personal computing devices such as PDAs, even mobile phones, to use 'dead time' travelling, for example, to practise language skills and self-test.

These young people are likely to be using the internet for self-directed tests and language acquisition exercises, interspersed with feedback from experts based at a distance, who may provide support through telephone, e-mail or video-conference facilities. Children who are focusing only on verbal communication skills might be put in contact with others in the same area working on the same skills; using mobile phones or online chat resources, they will have the opportunity to practise these skills, with perhaps one online moderator acting as facilitator for the community.

As the breadth and range of language learning activities shifts at this stage, there will need to be significant support for teachers to develop new skills in using ICTs to facilitate these new approaches to languages learning. A specialist teacher of Japanese, for example, may find herself as the 'hub' for a number of language students from across a city. She will need to be fluent in e-mail and internet usage, and in accessing relevant resources for her students, and in the skills needed to mediate online communities. She will also need the support of colleagues working in a similar way. The language colleges are likely to remain the focus for these activities, and to develop networks enabling these teachers to share resources and develop best practice both through face-to-face and virtual interactions.

As with KS3, a more sophisticated use of language use aids should be expected.

MFL in and out of school

A key difference between language learners in the UK and in mainland Europe is not one of competence or linguistic ability, it is that British learners spend only a fraction of the time learning languages and therefore make only a fraction of the progress compared to learners in mainland Europe. A second key difference is that many British learners with English as a first language simply view language learning as irrelevant. As it is unlikely, apart from in specialist language colleges, that the amount of time dedicated to languages in the curriculum will increase, if we are to have a significant impact upon language skills in the UK then opportunities for language acquisition and practise must be increased outside the classroom.

One of the features to distinguish effective language teaching from average language teaching over the next few years, therefore, is likely to be the success that teachers have in creating the motivation and opportunity for learners to practise language skills in the home or with peers. At this point, digital technologies may prove invaluable. The development in schools of foreign language digital lending libraries for DVDs and CDs; the establishment of e-mail networks and online communities with children in other countries; the creation by teachers of compelling foreign language games (for early learners, research would suggest these are likely to be resisted by secondary age children) to play at home; all of these can act as a stimulus to practise outside the school setting.

What is clear is that the technology in and of itself will not provide a solution to the problem of languages being viewed as irrelevant and difficult for many children; they can, however, act as a useful resource for teachers who are also able to motivate, engage and support learners through a raft of different activities.

LINKS

ALTE network: www.alte.org
CILT (National Centre for Languages): www.cilt.org.uk/irs
DIALANG: www.dialang.org
Global Nomads Group: www.gng.org
Internet Resources for Language Teachers and Researchers (University of Reading): www.rdg.ac.uk/AcaDepts/cl/slals/links.htm
Luckwell Primary School: www.luckwell.bristol.sch.uk
NACELL (National Advisory Centre for Early Language Learning): www.nacell.org.uk/resources/resources.htm
Futurelab Literature Review in Languages, Technology & Learning: www.futurelab.org.uk/research/lit_reviews.htm
Sir Bernard Lovell School Online MFL & ICT resource centre: www.sblonline.org.uk/international/lang_coll/mfl_teaching/index.html