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Pedagogical Basics of Using Computers in Foreign Language Learning

Innovative technologies in education are information and communication technologies inseparably connected with application of computer-assisted learning. N.Basova, S.Vetrov, M.Klarin, I.Pidlasiy, Zh.Poplavaska, D.Stetchenko, V.Tinniy, V.Shukshunov are engaged in the development of problems of innovative technologies application.

These problems were also examined in the works of V.Bezpal'ko, A.Nisimchuk, I.Pidlasiy, O.Shiyan N.Rotmistrov who think that new computer technologies brought us to the point where a computer can become a strong tool of education, in which all aspects of learning are modeled, – from methodical to presentation aspects [6, c.89]. However, not enough attention is paid to the application of computers in the learning of a foreign language with the aim of communicative competence development.

The purpose of this article is to consider possibilities of learning foreign language with the help of computers and Internet.

In higher schools of Ukraine computer educational multimedia is widely used in the learning of foreign languages, especially English.

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Though a computer is still relatively rare in the teaching process in Ukraine, it can be a partner for the learner to play educational games with, or it can be used to generate examples, to illustrate certain operations, or to stimulate conversation. Computer also acts as a tutor and guides the learner towards the correct answer while adapting the material to his/her performance. This flexibility is impossible to achieve with written handouts and worksheets.

Models for computer use in language learning are usually divided into three categories: 1. as a language teacher; 2. as a stimulus for conversation; 3. as an aid to cognitive development.

In order to think about uses of the computer in the classroom, it is necessary to keep two terms in mind. Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) is the term used to describe computer programs designed for teaching, whereas Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is the term used for different forms of second language instruction accomplished with the use of computers.

In using a CAI program, students follow the instruction as the lesson unfolds on the terminal while interacting with the computer. Generally limited to developing reading and writing skills, lessons may include drills and practice exercises, reading comprehension passages, games or simulations, etc. Over time the hardware has improved, which results in better graphic facilities, including colours, the possibility of animation, touch screen, audio output and video media. Listening comprehension exercises have been developed using a sound blaster and/or a CD-ROM. A short dialogue is displayed on the screen (students can hear it), and then a related question is viewed on the screen. Once the students type in an answer, the fast and accurate accessing system enables branching feedback to be provided in audio form. Students can also request backup information in written or audio form and can make use of an audiocard allowing instant access to digitally recorded sound files stored on the hard disk.

Rather than replacing teachers, computer-based packages are being used as classroom resources. The way in which these packages are used varies with the context of their use, age levels, subject areas or classroom settings. Using a computer in teaching languages can offer unlimited types of activities with considerable potential for learning.

The following describes some of the advantages and limitations of using a computer in CAI or CALL.

Advantages. Both CAI and CALL systems allow the normal and even unusual errors that people are apt to make. By creating friendly programs with both systems, any user can work independently at the console. The programs respect the individuality of the students by allowing them to make frequent choices with many options. The feedback to the users helps the students to analyse patterns in the language.

CALL programs present the learner with a novelty. They teach the language in different and more interesting, attractive ways and present language through games and problem-solving techniques. As a result, even tedious drills can become more interesting. Computers offer a valuable source of self-access study adaptable to the learner's level. Using a computer in teaching languages can offer unlimited types of activities with considerable potential for learning.

Besides teaching a foreign language, CALL programs will provide the learner with some sort of computer literacy, which is becoming essential in modern society and could be of great help in future training and career prospects. Students are more relaxed; they are no longer afraid of being corrected, judged, or watched. In fact, they create their own environment around the computer, a sort of privacy where intruders are not welcome; only some colleagues have access as needed.

The computer has no "days off". The computer is patient and will tirelessly go over and over again the same point for as long as necessary. The computer can provide information requested in a very short time.

The advantages mentioned above have some crucial limitations. Learners who do not have prior experience in using a keyboard might waste quite a bit of valuable time identifying letters on the keyboard. However, with practice this can be worked out if one is not afraid of learning new things.

Working with computers normally means that the learners work in isolation. This obviously does not help in developing normal communication between learners, which is a central aim in any language lesson. In practice, learners tend to revert to their mother tongue in discussions. The teacher should not allow this if he/she wants to improve the students' language skills.

Modern CALL and CAI programs deal mainly with reading and writing skills, and even though some listening programs have been developed recently, they are very limited (there are very few interactive games with outstanding graphics, colours, and spoken language capabilities).

The programs which develop communicative interaction normally present pre-determined uses of language based on the writer's imagination of what would take place rather than what people really say in real situations (so called "false conversations"). This sometimes creates confusion and frustration on the part of the learner. However, these problems tend to lessen as students become more familiar and comfortable with these programs.

Among other limitations is that the time and effort required to develop such programs can be considerable. Computers also cannot cope with the unexpected. It is more tiring to read

from a screen than from a printed text. For teachers who develop their own material, the time spent on programming and typing in the lessons can be quite lengthy.

The kind of exercise most appropriate for a computer is one in which there is only a small set of acceptable answers to each question and in which it is fairly easy to predict where the learner may go wrong. An example would be a drill aimed at a specific point of grammar and vocabulary.

The kind of exercise least capable of being computerised is one in which the student has a relatively free hand, as in essays or creative writing, or one in which the number of possibilities is too large for computerization to be a practical proposition, as in the case, for example, of translations of long passages. The computer is only an instructional medium. It is not tied to any teaching method. Being helpful in building or consolidating the basis necessary for achieving a reasonable level of communicative competence, computers have the advantage of allowing teachers to split the class, thus enabling the teacher to create the kind of environment which simulation and other activities require.

Students enjoy programs which have many possible variations and combinations. The teaching points may be primarily morphological, syntactic, lexical, or stylistic; they may call upon integrative skills, or they may relate to background knowledge. The exercises may involve any of a large number of operations-substitution or transformation drills, gap-filling exercises, copying, writing down a dictation, putting words in the correct order, or answering certain types of comprehension questions.

Some software packages include printed, audio, video, or other materials to be used in conjunction with the software for reading, writing, and many other types of classroom activities and provide a focus for small group discussion, cooperation, planning, record keeping, and problem solving at the computer. Techniques designed to enhance the illusion of a tutor can be psychologically helpful in the initial stages of computer assisted instruction as a means of overcoming the barrier between person and machine. These are likely to succeed best with younger pupils. If the computer's comments are given in the language taught, the exchange will also have some demonstrative value as a simulation of conversation. Clearly, it will be up to each teacher to determine, by trial and error, the optimal degree of personification for materials and students in question.

Some computer games can be helpful in enhancing reading. They can make reading interesting by providing an objective that has immediate results such as succeeding at a game. Instead of concentrating on the fact that they are reading English, students simply play a game.

Another advantage of these games is that they are "user friendly". A person does not need to know a lot about computers to be able to compete in these games. The dialogues usually include realistic language and contain a dose of humour as well.

If the teacher wants to help the students and have them read a bit more, s/he can prepare a short guide on what steps to follow to play in the game, and/or prepare a short introduction to the plot, or pre-teach some new vocabulary, and so on. Students play these games better in pairs, so they can discuss what to do next, help each other find clues, or, if necessary, look up words in an English dictionary. It does not matter how far into the game they get. The fact that they read and use English as naturally as possible and in a funny and interesting way is definitely a great asset.

Of the various techniques available, the use of help files enabling the learner to retrieve information as necessary immediately springs to mind. Help files provide the teacher not only with an unobtrusive solution to the problem, but also with a means of accommodating different learning styles.

For example, by storing grammar rules and examples of actual usage in a help file, teachers can cater at the same time to the learner who likes to be given rules at the outset, and to one who prefers to have a chance of deducing them. Lexical information and hints pointing the learner in the right direction or even providing the correct answer can be put into help files to change the computer from an instrument that simply teaches to a resource one learns from.

Another innovation involving self assessment consists of giving the learner the option of working mentally. The learner decides on the answer before requesting the correct answer for mental comparison. The mental comparison option legalizes the practice of pressing the return button without typing an answer in order to get at the correct answer. If a student answered in his/her mind, s/he can get immediate feedback with most programs by pressing the return button for the correct answer without actually typing it in. Although it has certain dangers and will be appropriate only in certain circumstances, it solves the typing problem and is very useful to students who are revising.

The learner may be able to adjust the level of difficulty of the activity. In a gap-filling exercise, for instance, the learner can choose the frequency or the size of the gap. Or if the speed is important, s/he can be allowed to select the pace at which the items are to be displayed. In all this, it is most important to remain flexible. The aim is to remove as far as possible any element of force and create fluid, multi- purpose, multi-level packages to be used by the learner as he/she deems fit.

Simulations can also encourage students to conduct role-plays with a view to gaining insight into an historical situation or to establish empathy with the central character. One of the great advantages of computer simulations is that they can often be used by groups of students as well as by individuals. Computer simulations can thus be of great assistance in simulating conversation, in confronting students with tasks to be carried out in the here and now.

In a typical application, the administrator uses the computer to test, to grade the test, to record the marks, to work out profiles, and uses the results to guide students through the material. The computer may keep an index of learning resources, help with registration, or do the time keeping. In the course of performing these duties, the computer stores, retrieves, and manipulates large amounts of data requiring the kind of memory which at present only a mainframe can provide.

The range of topics with which the computer can help is vast, from the evaluation of methods and materials through measuring the realism of teachers' expectations or the reliability of self assessment to conducting experiments on pacing, sequencing, interference, etc.

How quickly computer-based research will take off and how successful the computer will be is a matter for speculation, but it is bound to change to some extent, what happens in our classrooms. In spite of the many applications and advantages, CALL and CAI still have not found their rightful place in language learning and teaching. We should avoid asking ourselves how we can teach our lessons on the computer and begin to re-evaluate our methods in the light of the computer's tremendous teaching potential. Teachers must address themselves to the challenge of computers and effectively apply their theoretical knowledge and practical experience to the teaching of second-language communication through this new medium.

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