Let's Talk ICTs

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ABSTRACT

The spoken language is a difficult skill to learn and this is especially so in the case of secondary school students. ICTs play an important role in the teaching and learning process (Stubbs, 1992; Dudeney and Hockly, 2007, to mention just a few), the spoken language not being an exception to this rule. This paper is concerned with the contributions of ICTs to the teaching and learning of oral skills. A collection of some online resources are presented and classified according to the following features: competence level, type of activity, features of the oral skill practised, degree of interaction, etc. A full explanation is provided on each of these resources together with some suggestions for teachers about how to use them in the FL classroom.

Key Words: Foreign Language (FL), mother tongue (L1), Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Language Teaching (LT), spoken English.

INTRODUCTION

Since Lisbon Agenda 2010, the Council of Europe agreed on several aims to be attained by 2010, one of these aims being that students in all European countries should reach communicative competence in at least one FL (or two, in the case of bilingual communities) at the end of compulsory education. Galician students study both English (as a FL) and the two official languages in this autonomous community. English is important not only for commerce and access to information and technology; it also enables different communities and groups in the world to communicate with one another. However, we have to bear in mind that the L1 is instrumental to retain our cultural identity, tradition and values. Interculturality plays an important role in the teaching and learning of FLs (Kramsch, 1993).

When teaching/learning a language, there are four main skills we have to deal with, these are: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these four skills, I am going to focus on speaking because Galician/Spanish students need to improve this skill more than the others, they are not so confident in speaking as they are with the receptive skills. This is justified by the fact that speaking in the FL is very often limited to the classroom environment. They can listen to and read texts in the FL in the Internet and some printed material, but they have very few opportunities to speak English for real.

Furthermore, the main objective of foreign language teaching and learning is to acquire communicative competence. The C in ICTs stands for *Communication*, so the primary purpose of ICTs in the FL classroom should be to stimulate real communication between pupils; between teachers and pupils; between pupils and the whole educational community; between pupils and other pupils from other schools; between pupils and the real world outside the classroom, and so on and so forth.

The present paper arouses both from the interest in improving oral skills among our students and from a deep fascination by the great amount of pedagogical possibilities of ICTs, which have suffered a spectacular development in the last decade of the 20th century.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The interest in the spoken language is relatively recent. From the notional-functional approach or communicative language teaching onwards, experts have been concerned with communication in the FL classroom. However, they understood that teaching spoken English was to teach the language through repetition, pattern practise, drills and the like. This is not so, teaching the spoken language is to teach how to use the language in real-life situations, to communicate a message. Teaching speaking is more than encouraging learners to produce correct grammatical forms in spoken English. Grammatical competence is not the focus any more since the 1980s with the emergence of a new model which gave more importance to the "sociolinguistic competence" and the "strategic competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980) as subcompetences of the wider notion "Communicative Competence". Learners should be provided with opportunities to "produce extended spoken discourse in the second language" (Tarone, 1986:24). There are certain skills that seem to be unique to oral communication, such as turn taking and facilitation/compensation strategies, for example (see Bygate, 1987 for a comprehensive study). Nevertheless, enabling learners to draw on those skills and strategies is not the same as teaching spoken English. The EFL classroom does not seem to be the ideal setting for acquiring interaction and conversational skills. For this reason we, as teachers, must introduce ICTs in our language lessons since they can provide situations in which students can use the FL for real. It is perhaps time to explore other approaches to support students' acquisition of oral communication skills, such as the ones I propose in this paper (see section 2).

The present-day world is constantly changing, and these changes in society and technology urge for a change in education and in the way of teaching and learning. Schools have been supplied with the most modern educational resources, such as interactive whiteboards. Before the era of ICTs, in the classroom we only had the blackboard, text-based materials, such as magazines, books, newspapers and some cassettes. Nowadays, we count on the possibilities of computers, CD-ROMs, DVDs, digital cameras and video cameras, scanners, printers, the Internet, the Web 2.0, the interactive whiteboard, and so on. ICTs and the World Wide Web facilitate the access to several resources in a synchronous and an asynchronous way and without geographical or time limits. Since technologies favour communication and allow the exchanges of information among several people, we can say that they are a good instrument for practising the spoken language – as well as the written one – in order to communicate effectively. ICTs are so important in our curriculum that the Council of Europe has included them as one of the eight key competencies to be attained by the end of compulsory education (*i.e.* Competency in dealing with ICTs and Digital Competency). Furthermore, we can state that these digital instruments go hand in hand with learner autonomy because their implementation favours the organisation of environments that aim at fostering autonomy in learning and co-responsibility in the teaching and learning process. Autonomy and Personal Initiative is another of the eight key competencies established by the Council of Europe and supported by the LOE.

Learning with computers (*i.e.* CALL) is probably the newest way to learn a FL. We can say that it is in a constantly developing phase since programs for all kinds of learners, levels and areas are appearing continuously. Besides, there is a growing interest in working with blogs, wikis, podcasts and the whole of the networking tools of the Web 2.0.

We must note that technology must only be used to support instruction. Technology is only one of the many tools learners can use. The learner is the centre of the teaching and learning process and everything else is there for the learner to take and use in order to ease the process. The learner must be an active participant in the process; participation is the key to learn in an autonomous way using ICTs (taking part in chats, projects, etc.).

The teacher plays the role of a prompter and a facilitator of the teaching and learning process. He/she is no longer the main source of information. The teacher must support the learning process by scaffolding and modelling the students' output and language performances. This change in the role of the teacher is instrumental in order to foster autonomous learning among our pupils.

Thanks to the Internet, communicating with the world is at everyone's finger tips twenty-four hours a day. We, as teachers, must take advantage of this fact and use it in the FL classroom. There are

thousands of resources online useful to teach and learn a FL. Here I present some of the resources available to practise the oral component of the language.

2. TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES TO PRACTISE SPOKEN ENGLISH

2.1. Audioblogging

An Audioblog (or Radioblog) consists of a Weblog in which its author includes audio files or podcasts. Other people, authorised by the Audioblog's owner, can also comment on the entries or audio files, and even include other audio files in the same gallery. The word Weblog comes from *Web* and *log* (*i.e.* 'diary'), so a Weblog or Blog is a kind of diary published online in which a person (its author) writes about what s/he likes in a chronological order. In other words, Audioblogging is an extension of Weblogging, where Webloggers substituted the written posts with voice recordings.

Weblogs provide a medium to capture personal thoughts in the form of text – or speech, in the case of Audioblogs. This emerging technology has been identified as a tool that could potentially enhance the teaching and learning of oral conversation skills. Teachers using Audioblogs in English classes have reported improvements in students' oral skills (Tan, Ow and Tan, 2006). Tan et al. found that the use of Audioblogs enabled students who had a weaker proficiency in oral skills to acquire formulaic expressions when they listened to the oral performance of stronger students. They noticed that the students in the treatment group had higher average gains in their test scores than the students in the control group. Furthermore, students can also learn from the mistakes identified in performances of other students. We, as teachers, can ask students to provide feedback and comments on other students' oral performances in the Audioblog. In this way, it is not only the teacher the one who provides feedback and the students may feel more motivated to do their best in the oral performances because their mates are going to listen to them and they love being admired by their classmates. This tool allows students to interact with both the teacher and the classmates through the comments in the Audioblog and visiting other Audioblogs. Furthermore, this emerging technology enables students to evaluate their own oral performances. For instance, once they have recorded the audio file, they can listen to it as many times as they can and they can self-assess their own performance.

2.2. Podcasting and videocasting

Podcasting is essentially Audioblogging, the difference is that the audio files are not necessarily published in a Weblog but in a Web page or site. They are voice recordings posted online for others to listen to and download, usually for MP3 players, for personal use. There are many Web pages and other sites which include Podcasts of any topic. Podcast directories, such as the Education Podcast Network (http://epnweb.org/) and the RECAP Podcasts for educators, schools and colleges (http://recap.ltd.uk/podcasting/index.php), are also emerging in the Internet. There are many schools and colleges which are beginning to use them (for example, IES Lomo Apolinario, The Canary Islands, which also has a Radio-Web). There are a lot of Web pages which contain ideas on how to use podcasts in the classroom. There are many teachers who use them in their lessons (see www.proyectogrimm.net). Teachers can create a podcast of daily assignments or lessons and publish it for their students. Likewise, students can create and publish content and deliver it to their teachers or to their classmates. Students can express themselves on a wide range of topics (food, culture, music, sport, trips, and so on). Schools are increasingly using the Internet to promote what they do, and to celebrate the achievements of their children, and podcasting is an excellent way of doing this. When students do something for their classmates and, above all for being published over the Internet, they are more motivated and they are more interested in the quality of their work.

Sound is instrumental to learning a FL as pupils need to develop the communication skills of listening and speaking (as well as reading and writing, of course). Furthermore, if it is accompanied by image, its effect on the learner is stronger (*i.e.* videocasts). Students can record audio files in the FL to focus

on their pronunciation and intonation; they can listen to it several times and assess their spoken language. It is not hard to make MP3 recordings. A free sound editor, such as Audacity (http://audacity.sourceforge.net) allows you to make and save recordings as MP3 files. You can also use a digital voice recorder or simply a microphone in your computer and record your voice. Using MP3 players (which also record sound) or voice recorders, students can conduct interviews, practise dialogues, record role plays in communicative tasks and store their MP3 recordings for later use or transfer them to a computer and publish them in the School Network or the Internet.

2.3. Videoconferencing

If we have a web-based video-conferencing link via a Webcam and program such as Microsoft NetMeeting, we can do an infinite number of activities with our pupils communicating with other students of English as a FL from other schools (visit <http://www.langauges-ict.org.uk/technology/technology.htm> for activities).

Videoconferencing offers real situations to practise the FL. It puts FL learners in real-time contact with other students of EFL from different countries and cultures. They can exchange personal information, take part in role plays, participate in games, and above all, communicate in the FL with a real purpose. For further information about using videoconferencing in the classroom, visit <http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&catcode=ss_tl_use_02&rid=5223> or <http://www.global-leap.com>. We must note that on-line communication of any type requires careful consideration of security issues. We must be careful when introducing our pupils in a process of on-line communication.

2.4. Voice chatting

This is a powerful software tool which also provides teachers with authentic situations to use the FL. Students would learn better if they use the FL for a real purpose. In order for communication to take place, there must be an information gap between the interlocutors (information-gap principle) according to the Communicative Language Teaching approach. This principle is based on the idea that one interlocutor in a conversation has information or knowledge that the other interlocutor does not have and must discover.

With a program like Skype (http://www.skype.com/intl/es/) our pupils can talk on the phone via the Internet with EFL learners from other countries, they may get to know each other, talk about hobbies, daily routines, and other topics. In this way, they practise the vocabulary they learn in the classroom in an authentic situation – *i.e.* they talk to other students, like themselves, and they do it to obtain information they do not have and want to know. It is agreed among researches that activities that involve real communication promote learning. It is noted that we need to include real settings in the classroom to practise the FL.

CONCLUSION

The era of ICTs provides teachers with technological advances which offer them countless possibilities for personal and professional development. In this paper, I have presented only a part of the several advantages that the Web 2.0 gives us when teaching and learning a FL with particular reference to the teaching and learning of the spoken language. Now, what we have to do is to get the most benefit from the possibilities ICTs and the web offer in order to use them with success.

I hope the resources presented in this paper together with the creativity and an overcoming professional spirit will help teachers to foster communication and the fluent use of the spoken language for real-life purposes.

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