Challenges posed by the use of ICTs in the teaching of English

Artículo corto que presenta información reflexiva previa a una investigación.

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The digital immigrant in me is compelled by the ubiquitous presence of this argument in the literature of education 'Teachers need to integrate technology seamlessly into the curriculum instead of viewing it as an add-on, an afterthought, for an event. – Heidi-Hayes Jacobs. This notion that ICT's allow professionals, and more particularly language professionals, to tailor the very fabric of teaching and research has accompanied my practice for quite some time.

This is true within the context of teaching English as its delivery in different settings has been boosted partly by the evolution and implementation of ICT's. However, the relationship between the former and the latter is still in its early stages and there are still questions writ large around how they can effectively harness one another. This article seeks to address how a) the varying degrees of teaching competences exert influence on the use of software, materials and resources in the digital literate language classroom of today b) the bridging of traditional learning methods and emerging student-centred ones via online platforms still remain challenges for those professionals seeking to integrate ICT's into the teaching of English.

Degrees of teaching competences via ICT`s

Kaizen is a Japanese concept used in technology to signify change, and refinement; it also rings true as one of the challenges behind the ICT's and English teaching synergy. Educational administrators, teachers and learners are still at odds when it comes to dealing with CALL (computer assisted language learning) and online media. Steve Pinker (2002) argues this is so because "some categories really are social constructions: they exist only because people tacitly agree to act as if they exist" (p.23). Some language professionals acknowledge how important ICT's are to shape learning, while others still question how these can deliver the promise of better language training. One might initially argue there are various assumptions as to what it is considered a sound use of technology in the language classroom. The Warschauer's model (1998) explains why professionals of all walks of life coexist with technology in myriad ways. Warschauer distinguishes how the three stances below (graph 1) have a profound effect on how language providers deliver content via all the technological platforms available.

Graph 1.

Determinist

Technology has a "magic" effect on learning, and simply including it will determine a more positive outcome for any activity.

Instrumental

Technology is not capable of bringing about positive learning results in and of itself. Rather, the result depends on how well the technology is incorporated into the lesson, how well it supports the objectives, and how well the computer-based activities are managed

Critical

A learning environment is its own ecosystem and any addition to the ecosystem—such as instructional technology— brings about a slightly or radically different learning environment. There may be shifts in power, identity, or communication patterns, or changes in relationships between individuals and groups

Language educators come from diverse academic settings and discourses; their experience and technological competence (Savory 2006) differ greatly and more even so when they prioritize, plan and deliver content. One can argue language teachers have moved away from a determinist perspective, as there is a widespread understanding that technology is an enabler and not a 'magic wand'. However, existing literature suggests language teachers still struggle with how to incorporate it into their day-to-day planning and specific language teaching environments (Petrie, Avery 2011, Kumutha, Hamidah 2014). This is particularly true of language teachers, those who were mentored under a positivist school assume 'the phenomenon of 'establishing routines' was essential to the managing of teaching and learning in a classroom and, as a consequence, many teachers find the use of computers disruptive'. While those schooled under social-oriented schemes subscribe to the principle that 'there is widespread agreement that teachers with relatively strong constructivist beliefs, or in some studies a more entrepreneurial approach to their own continuing professional development, report a higher frequency of computer use'. One's teaching guiding principles are thus inextricably linked, to a great or less extent, with how one incorporates CALL and online media in the language classroom.

The English classroom of today requires language professionals to fine tune their know-how of digital literacy defined as 'the skills required to achieve digital competence, the confident and critical use of ICT for work, leisure, learning and communication'. We, language providers, are still coming to terms with how to meet the complex demands of our students, let alone, how to muster and incorporate their psychosocial academic and personal needs, skills and attitudes via the use of ICT's. One way of meeting such needs relies on how to use the varying emerging online resources to strengthen and polish the existing skills we all hone in the classroom. By making sound use of hypertext literacy (Harashima, 2008) how texts contain links that bring together other texts, info- graphics or bibliographies; gaming literacy (Zimmerman, 2009) how to use the semiotic messages in video games to learn English through the use of games; mobile literacy (UNESCO, 2015) how to use of mobile technology, either on its own or in conjunction with other ICTs, to bring in educational resources, generate content both within and without the schoolroom English teachers make extensive use of ICT resources to foster all sort of cognitive, social and skill-oriented activities. These, in turn, call for students' prior knowledge and experiences framed under scaffold-based models and practices. However, there appears to be no set consensus as to how they can aid critical thinking, ethical judgment or lead to fair assessment. This will help explain why these emerging literacies are not readily built-in our teaching syllabus and day-to-day planning and remain contested and contesting in the English language classroom.

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Bridging traditional approaches and student-centred methodologies via ICT's

Digital literacy and ICT's effective use in the language classroom are practices driven mostly by the practical needs and demands of the contemporary world.

English teachers have mostly been groomed under 'one-size-fits-all' approaches and have migrated slowly to incorporating student-centred learning schemes. The challenge still remains as to how to transfer this pedagogical shift into the language classroom. Westwood signals how "(t) here is a natural common-sense appeal to the notion of learners constructing their own knowledge through their own endeavours, because most of what individuals learn in everyday life clearly comes from personal discovery and experience, not from instruction" (Westwood, 2008).

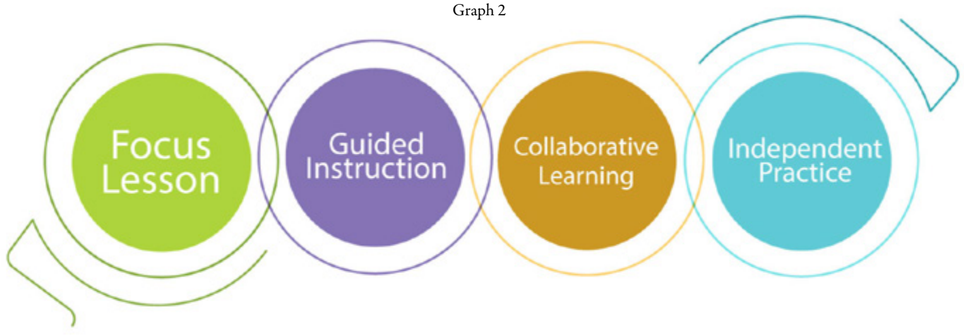
> "...student-centred approaches allow for the use of ICT platforms"

Digital literacy and ICT's appear to echo Westwood especially when it comes to English learning given that emerging applications, online language schools and free courses offered by leading universities draw on the increasing need of coupling classroom-like personal experiences and digital content to tailor the English learning experience of today. In following, for instance, a four-tier structure based on the Pearson and Gallagher model known as Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) (Pearson and Gallagher 1983, p 320) English teachers welcome Vygotskian practices since it is through abundant guidance and classroom guidance that meaningful learning takes place.

> "...that technology is an enabler and not a 'magic wand'"

English language learners first focus on how to tackle a content/problem/project they are presented with. Then, both students and teachers set about pooling ideas and creating a detailed plan on how to guide and solve any situation by using any of the digital literacy strategies of today i.e. generating learning. The fact is most student-centred approaches allow for the use of ICT platforms. For instance, inquiry based methods "use appropriate ICT tools and techniques to gather data, think critically and logically about relationships between evidence and explanations, and communicate arguments (students) learn to question, debate, or explore a deeper understanding of the world" (Westwood, 2008). The following six student-centred methods are best suited to encourage English teachers and learners to adopt a hands-on personal repertoire to learning a language via ICT's Content-Based Language Instruction (CBI) (Brown, 2000: 219), Discovery-learning (Bruner, 1990) (Ormrod, 2000), Problem-based learning (Lee 2001), Project-based learning (Thomas 2000) Resource-based learning (Martindale & Wiley 2005) and Computer-assisted learning (Baz & Tekdal 2014).

Graph 2



hypertexts to learn/teach how to give directions, using mobile literacy "elevate" to teach economy of speech in English. Next, language learners help one another to use language to resolve the situation/task/project. They, then, share it with other groups and offer feedback to one another on their performance. Finally, the learners take some time to reflect on their personal achievements and contributions to share their independent reflections on the whole process with the teacher i.e. using blogs.

Language teachers cope with figuring out the intricacies of any tongue's grammar and should approach ICT's as a set of semiotic rules that have made their way into the repertoire of language users. In so doing, teachers do not leave aside the very own foundations that rely largely on cognitive, social and strategic learning to hone linguistic and communicative competence. ICT's allow tutors to teach beyond one-dimensional platforms and, instead, guide their expertise so that "learners are expected and encouraged to discover the knowledge, to generate underlined rules based on a series of examples and counter-examples, and to be able to further apply these rules or knowledge to novel cases and deal with everyday life situations" (Horng-Yi 2014). The effective use of ICT resources, matter-of-factly, stresses the importance of higher-order thinking and transferable skills, the paradox still rests on how to incorporate this new learning into the mainstream version of English teaching.

One coping strategy to incorporate the traditional into the learner-oriented technology assisted language classrooms of today is by adapting long-standing models

The above shows that it is strategically sound and language enriching to link ICT's and student-centred approaches without "turning a blind eye" to long-established and fruitful teaching models.

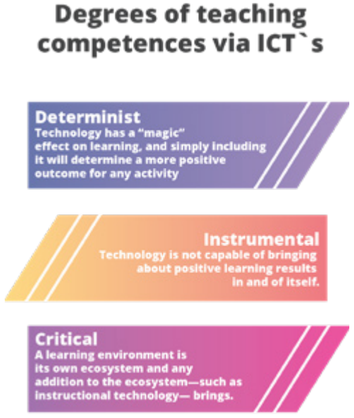
Digital literacies, ICT's and learner-centred methods have forged a bond that has migrated from practices that stem predominantly from work and commercial settings. In these settings learning is not presented in a seemingly linear fashion and there are no 'set-in-stone' protocols like those in the language classroom. We English teachers and trainers are still confronted with how to naturalise such scenarios in the classroom. Siemens and Downes (2005) have labelled such process connectivism "learning theory

that integrates the use of Internet technologies to learning-teaching environments (thereby) knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (Downes 2007). In my experience as a learning material development and CLIL lecturer at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Bogotá I have facilitated learners and pre-service language teachers to navigate the networks of varying contents, digital contents, work demands and Spanish and English language learning. In so doing, we, the learners and the lecturer, have gradually honed a set of skills, listed below, that are not as exhaustibly stimulated otherwise.

> "Blending ICT's into the English language classroom is as inexorable as it is auspicious"

- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes, information sources and non-human appliances.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections amongst fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision. (adapted from Siemens 2005 p 22).

Blending ICT's into the English language classroom is as inexorable as it is auspicious. English language practitioners, learners are gradually accommodating their diverse competences, literacy & digital literacy knowledge, semiotic understandings, methods and strategies to meet the ever-changing but transformable needs of the language classroom. In an era of personalisation and bespoke environments we teachers should be part of the pedagogical revolution brought about by ICT's. The English classroom should be a platform to engage learners in the critical construction of their linguistic capital "an individual's ability to move across diverse social fields with relative ease and success which will ultimately result in improving the apprentices' language awareness" (Fairclough, 1992) and how English teachers help them confront these situations is the greatest challenge behind the effective use of ICT's in the English classroom.



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