

The internet as a tool for the development of intercultural communicative competence in english language education

Introduction

The use of computers in foreign language education was probably foreseen by the inventors and users of early computers. Perhaps some teachers thought that their roles in foreign language education would be less significant in the near future as a result of revolutionary uses of developing computer technologies. The dream of ‘communicating robots’ and ‘teaching machines’ seemed possible. The employers who hired teachers of a foreign language would be very much attracted to the idea since the ‘robot teachers’ would not get tired of repeating the model to be followed by learners. They would not have worries about salary that might reduce the level of productivity, either. The cartoon producers used the theme and not only children, but adults were entertained with the adventures of ‘communicating robot cartoon characters’, as well. Such predictions and expectations about the technology have not come true yet, if they ever happen one day. They are most probably posed by *behavioristic approaches to learning* that influenced foreign language teaching.

An Overview on Computer Assisted Language Learning

Warschauer M. (1996) categorized the evolutionary development of computer assisted language learning (known as CALL) in terms of three somewhat distinct phases which he referred to as *behavioristic CALL*, *communicative CALL*, and *integrative CALL*. [1] The first phase of CALL viewed the use of early computer technology in education as ‘instructor-tutor’. However, the results of *Behaviorist CALL* were disappointing due to learners’ lack of interest in repetition-based artificial interaction with computers.

Further developments in computers and the other information and communications technology abbreviated as ICT) have provided teachers and learners of foreign languages with various opportunities [2]. Successive digital technology offered a better quality, portability, storability, accessibility. For instance, portable cassette players and audio-video recorders were replaced by MP3/MP4 players and i-pods. The paradigm shift (as Thomas Kuhn first used it) in social sciences and humanities [3] made *Cognitive-communicative approaches* dominant in foreign language teaching. Communicative language teaching was attracted to the use of newer opportunities offered by the recent technological developments. The second phase of computer assisted language learning, therefore, was *communicative CALL* [4]. Recently, the nature of information and communications technology has been evolved into a stage which is ‘developing fast, becoming quickly cheap and widespread and so available to the ordinary people soon after the appearance in the electronic market’. Thus, *communicative CALL* used the computer technology not only as ‘tutor’ but also as ‘stimulator’ and ‘tool’. In the case of ‘stimulator’, the purpose of the CALL activity is to stimulate students’ discussion, critical thinking and writing, rather than having the right answers discovered. In addition to some software programs, which may not have been specifically designed for language learners, like *the Sims* (or *the Sim City*), the teachers who tried to follow the principles of communicative language teaching (especially the PPP approach) widely used the audio-video presentation facilities that the technology made available for them. The function of computer technology as ‘tool’ further empowered the language learners since they easily managed to use or understand the language of the programs. Being able to use them sometimes did not necessarily provide any language learning material at all [5]. Examples of *computer as tool* include

Microsoft Office programs that enable learners to write an essay in Microsoft Word, to use the editing facilities, spelling and grammar checkers while writing, to look the words up in electronic monolingual or bilingual dictionaries in the forms of CD, to prepare a presentation with PowerPoint, to publish a class journal with Microsoft Publisher, to edit self-recorded audio-video clips with Windows Movie Maker or InterVideo WinDVD Creator. Recent developments in ICT that are available to the teachers of the Communicative CALL offer many more opportunities which would be impossible to cover within the limitations of this paper. Despite the rich input availability in foreign language learning environments (inside or outside the classroom), the Communicative CALL was not found to be satisfactory since it did not make a major impact on the learners' achievement [5].

The third phase of computer assisted language learning is the *integrative CALL*, which is based on the availability of multimedia technology and the internet to the public and their intensive use usually by learners rather than teachers. *Multimedia technologies* allow students to have great control over their learning at their own pace and even on their own individual needs and interests in an emergent curriculum to be designed during a non-linear course of language learning. They also usually create an authentic environment by means of the natural combination of reading, writing, speaking and listening in a single activity. Furthermore, they can facilitate a primary focus on the content objectives while still keeping a secondary focus on learning strategies and language forms by allowing students to have an access to prompts, which are the help functions about grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary or appropriate learning strategy. *The Internet*, as an important development in ICT, has reshaped the uses of computers for language learning more than anything else. The Internet, which now also refers to the *World Wide Web*, allows the users not only to process the information but also to communicate with other users synchronously (with all users chatting or videoconferencing at the same time) or asynchronously (with a delayed message system such as e-mail). Learners of many languages have access to a great amount of authentic target-language information, as well as possibilities to share their own multimedia information with an international audience by means of the World Wide Web – the Internet, which partly transformed the computer into a multi-purpose tool that functions as a library, a publishing house, a telephone, and an interactive television. It has already transformed many spheres of business, entertainment, academia and education in almost all developed and developing countries of the world and Kazakhstan does not seem to be an exception. [6]

The Internet and ELT in Kazakhstan

There are three main steps for any instructional technology to be integrated into education. First, the new technology should be *available* to people who are supposed to employ it. Second, the people who are supposed to benefit from the new technology should be technology –literate, and thus they should have started to *use* it with an easy access. Third, the use of such instructional technology should be *modified* to best fit the needs and interests of those who would benefit from it. Since this paper is concerned with the third step more, assumptions on the previous steps in Kazakhstan can be overviewed before discussing the opportunities that the Internet can provide for learning and teaching English for intercultural communication.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) - the United Nations agency for information and communication technologies, the number of Internet users in Kazakhstan should have reached almost 6 million people (or a little less than 40 percent of the country's total population) [7]. Almost ninety percent of Kazakhstani secondary schools and all tertiary level educational institutions have an Internet connection, which indicates that Kazakhstan recognizes the value of access to the World Wide Web. However, according to Internet World Statistics, Kazakhstan is rated a little over the World average in internet penetration percentage of the country population, but far below the average of developed countries. Internet penetration percentage average in the World is about 35 % and in Europe 67 % [8].

According to the data provided in 2010 by the *Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 75.7 % of internet users are regular and experienced users.

| Level of computer literacy of users | | | | |
|--|-----------|----------|--------------|------------------|
| | No skills | Beginner | Regular user | Experienced user |
| Republic of Kazakhstan | 7.9 % | 16.5 % | 65.1 % | 10.6 % |

2010 Statistics - *Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan*
http://www.stat.kz/digital/inf_obshestvo/Pages/default.aspx

The same agency provides the data on the main purpose of the use of Internet, which reveals the fact that only 25.9 percent uses the Internet in order to develop their personal skills in their education or occupation, but 88.4 percent uses it for general communication [9]. Despite the lack of specific research on the extent to which internet is used in foreign language education, it is generally accepted that the Internet promises a great deal of impact on foreign language learning (or rather learning English as the primary language for international and intercultural communication).

| Main purpose of using the Internet | | | | | |
|---|---------------|--|--|--|--|
| | Communication | Searching the Information and On - line Services | Purchasing and Selling Products and Services | Contact with Public and Government Organizations | Occupation, Education, Raising the level of one's skills |
| Republic of Kazakhstan | 88.4 % | 84.6 % | 4.2 % | 22.3 % | 25.9 % |

2010 Statistics - *Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan*
http://www.stat.kz/digital/inf_obshestvo/Pages/default.aspx

English language education in Kazakhstan is highly encouraged by the state educational policies. As some of the indications of encouragement, English language education playing a key role in Kazakhstan's integration process with the global community, the examples below are worth mentioning:

- the state language policy that emphasizes the use of three languages in education (Kazakh, Russian and English) [10],
- signing the Bologna declaration which had special significance in the context of the country's efforts for deeper integration into the international community [11] [12],
- the state stipends for Bolashak program whose students have received undergraduate and graduate degrees in the best U.S., UK, and other Western colleges and universities [13][14].

The developed countries of the World have been focusing on the integration of the digital technology including the Internet, into lingua-didactics and pedagogies of foreign language teaching

for the last decade. Drawing attention to the generation gap between learners and teachers, Marc Prensky compares the interaction between the *youth culture* and the *adult culture* in a usual educational context in terms of their approaches, values, attitudes, knowledge and skills for the use of digital technology. He concludes that a learner-centered, interactive use of digital technologies (and certainly the Internet as a wonderful medium for authentic communication within and across cultures and languages) must prevail in and out of the language classrooms. He calls the youth as '*digital natives*' and the adult generation of teachers as '*digital immigrants*' [15].

"Today's students have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age. Our students have changed radically. They are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach." Marc Prensky

The new generations of digital learners in Kazakhstan are probably following the same path as their global peers in the North American and European countries where the Internet is as common as toys for children. They often go online at social network such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, My Space, Hi 5!, Tagged, Badoo, or the others. The number of Facebook users in Kazakhstan has already reached up to almost 300 thousand. Therefore, the teachers and researchers of English as the language of intercultural communication inevitably consider using the Internet as a significant tool for developing communication skills during inter-cultural or cross-cultural encounters.

Current Trends in Teaching Languages across Cultures

The teaching of culture is thought to be an inseparable part of language teaching, although teachers and researchers cannot agree on how to do it. Importance of culture in the foreign language curriculum especially gained momentum with the emergence of the communicative approach [16]. Later when it was discovered that the target culture communities were not in a monolithic structure, but rather multiple and diverse, researchers developed a concern about the learning process which might lead a foreign language learner to be exposed to a kind of en-culturalization within the communicative competence framework, where one acquired new cultural frames of reference and a new world view [17]. Thus, modeling after native speakers for cultural learning was rejected and it gave way to a new direction –toward an "intercultural competence" to indicate the goal towards which students who want to communicate "across different cultures" should work [18]. Communication situations are currently seen as encounters between the learner's culture and that of the other. The use of the term "intercultural" reflects the view that foreign language students need to gain insight both into their own culture and the foreign culture, as well as be aware of the meeting of cultures that often takes place in communication situations in the foreign language [19].

Communicative approaches to language teaching, which began to gain increasing popularity in 1990s and still shaped characteristics of today's more participatory approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning, Strategy-based Learning, Task-based and Project-based Learning, emphasized the merging of language and culture learning. Moreover, a correlation was recognized between the use of a task-based learning, the development of functional learning environments, and the potential of electronic learning networks for enhancing intercultural learning [20].

In Kazakhstan, however, there has been no research, available to the attention of the author of this paper, reported in English on language learning environments that try to facilitate intercultural learning by means of establishing international learning networks. The British Council project that involved a genuine collaborative work at national museums in Almaty between students- prospective ELT teachers and translators in Kazakhstan and British students of Central Asian Studies in the summer of 2010 was a good example of intercultural learning environment. Nevertheless, except for few student exchange programs, the learners of English language do not have any opportunities for authentic intercultural learning environments that might accelerate their communication skills in English.

Culture Learning in EIL

Culture learning in a course of English as an international language refers to the process of acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the culture-specific and culture-general which are required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures.

According to Paige et al. [21], culture learning is “a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively.” It involves the following points:

- Learning about one’s own culture and defining self-identity as a cultural being,
- Learning about culture and its effects on an individual’s identity and behavior during his/her communication with others ,
- Culture-specific learning; i.e. learning about a particular culture, including its language, customs, traditions, arts and literature, music as well as stereotypical behaviours in certain situations,
- Culture-general learning; i.e. learning about common human values, intercultural grounds for communication and cross-cultural phenomena such as cultural adaptation,
- Learning how to learn; i.e. developing strategies for becoming an effective language and culture learner.

The Internet as a Tool for Intercultural Learning

Task-based instruction that involves the Internet can provide enormous opportunities for real-like intercultural interaction. Below a few ideas that can help a teacher integrate ‘the intercultural aspect’ into ELT through the Internet. Many more ideas can be developed and activated through negotiations with learners for their adventure in exploring different cultural backgrounds of EIL users:

- Keeping the differences of communication between the face-to-face and online interaction in mind, learner-produced language can be published on *blogs or vlogs* for the international audience to respond to. The posts that are received can be used as a basis for discussion in class over to raise ‘intercultural awareness’.
- Students may be encouraged to join in ‘interest groups’ through Yahoo Groups or the like. Then the teacher may ask for an oral report on the experience.
- Students may share a page in their account for a social network such as Facebook or Linked In. A conversation over the Netiquette of social networking can follow.
- Groups of students may prepare a ‘cultural sensitivity’ blog (or website) that highlights the detailed descriptions of local values for the intercultural speaker.
- The teacher may develop a list of potentially related tasks for intercultural learning in a networked environment which is based on the common reading of literary texts.

As Riel (1992) points out [22], learners should deal with “interdisciplinary themes to be explored through activity-based projects in new patterns of social engagement.” This allows students to “*become active problem solvers, work cooperatively, and use and construct knowledge in flexible ways*”.

To sum up, the teachers and researchers of English as the language of intercultural communication inevitably consider using the Internet as a significant tool for developing communication skills during inter-cultural or cross-cultural encounters.

The Internet, as a different medium of communication from actual face-to-face interaction, may foster learners’ motivation for voluntary participation in constructive projects. The researchers and teachers in Kazakhstan will eventually focus more on the functional uses of the Internet, because it is available and widely used. Learning English for intercultural communication by discovering the essentials of the dynamic nature of intercultural encounters on the World Wide Web, a new multilingual generation who can take advantage of global opportunities will soon emerge.

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Түйін

Бұл мақалада ағылшын тілін мәдениетаралық қатынастың құралы ретінде компьютер арқылы оқытудың даму кезендері сөз етіледі. Сондай-ақ, компьютер арқылы тіл үйретудің қарым-қатынас құралы ретінде қолдану қызметіне байланысты Қазақстандағы интернет қолдану жағдайларын зерделей отырып, интернет арқылы ағылшын тілін үйретудің сапасын көтерудің мүмкіншіліктерін қарастырады.

Резюме

В данной статье рассматриваются способы обучения английскому языку как инструменту межкультурной коммуникации посредством компьютера. Так же изучаются современная ситуация использования интернета в коммуникации в Казахстане и пути дальнейшего развития обучения английскому языку посредством интернета.

Özet

Bu makalede İngilizcenin kültürler arası iletişim aracı olarak öğretilmesinde bilgisayar destekli dil öğreniminin gelişim aşamalarına değinilmiştir. Bilgisayar teknolojileriyle desteklenmiş dil eğitiminin yeni bir aşaması olarak İnternetin, kültürler arası iletişim imkanlarına sunduğu katkılarla, Kazakistan`da da kullanım alanlarının yaygınlaşmasıyla birlikte, İngilizce öğretiminin kalitesinin artırılabilceği konusu işlenmiştir.