

Are we there yet? Normalising CALL in the context of primary languages in England

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Abstract. The presence of technology in foreign education dates back to the 1960's. After over 50 years of research and practice, we are now moving towards discussion of identifying the end goal of integration that became known as normalisation (Bax, 2003). The majority of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) approaches and normalisation research is conducted within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. CALL, however, is not restricted to EFL and there is a lot of good practice observed in the mainstream language classroom. This paper explores the concept of normalisation of CALL, applying it to a new context of primary Modern Languages (ML). The research identifies factors that impede successful CALL, with a special focus on pedagogical practice and examines it closely in relation to specialist and non-specialist teachers.

Keywords: CALL, normalisation, primary languages, MFL.

1. Introduction

The abundance of CALL research relates mostly to an EFL context. As Egbert (2008) points out, there is a need to extend the inquiry to other settings as contextual differences are currently not represented well. Primary ML settings in England offer an interesting insight in relation to CALL. While with an EFL context there is no need for discussion about the importance of the subject, the place of ML in the primary curriculum has been unstable due to its non mandatory status which is only to change from September 2014. This lack of stability impacts provision, i.e. variety of languages taught, how often and who delivers them –specialist or

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non-specialist (generalist) teachers². On the other hand, the Whiteboard Expansion Project was the catalyst for technology integration (Lewin, Somekh, & Steadman, 2008). The cross-curricular nature of information and communications technology (ICT) made that integration present and embedded it within teachers' everyday practice, also in ML education (Wade, Marshall, & O'Donnell, 2009). However, the common problem of focusing on technology rather than pedagogy also applies here (O'Hara, 2008). According to Macrory, Chretine, and Martin (2009), this is especially true within primary ML being a relatively new field for teachers who feel uneasy about their new roles.

With the growing importance of ICT in language education, the term normalisation (Bax, 2003) started to appear in the CALL literature. Normalisation has been defined by Bax (2003, 2011) as a stage when technology is so integrated into teaching practice that it becomes unnoticed and its use enhances learning. The current project researches the concept of normalisation of CALL, applying it to a new context of primary languages. It aims to identify broader factors which impede normalisation in primary CALL, with special focus on pedagogy and redefine the concept to fit the given context. The research draws largely on previous normalisation studies (Chambers & Bax 2006; Ward, 2007) as well as wider research on primary language learning and ICT integration.

2. Method

The researcher's philosophical position placed the study within the interpretive paradigm. Ethnography was chosen as the most suitable approach, allowing greater immersion and understanding of the researched context, and aligning the design with the sociocultural theory behind normalisation (Bax, 2011). Since true ethnography is difficult to achieve in educational research, the study adopted Holliday's (1997) perspective and was ethnographic in nature.

The methods used included participant and non-participant observations, interviews with the pupils, staff and stakeholders, a diary and audio recording of chosen lessons. Both specialist and non-specialist teachers participated. Non-specialists were also observed while teaching other subjects to allow for comparisons of pedagogy.

2. In the present work, a specialist is defined as an MFL trained teacher (be it primary or secondary) who has a very good knowledge of the language and/or language teaching pedagogy and who is hired by the head to deliver MFL lessons on a weekly basis; a non-specialist is defined as a primary trained teacher with very limited language knowledge and skills and no language teaching training.

3. Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed that the factors impeding normalisation revolve around issues related to technology, but also general problems surrounding primary language provision. Hence the discussion below focuses on both, as both need to be addressed for normalisation to take place.

3.1. Attitudes

In the researched school, the management's attitudes and beliefs about the role of technology in education, the place of Early Language Learning (ELL) in the curriculum as well as beliefs about successful provision were the driving force behind ICT integration and the form in which language teaching was conducted. They determined the type and the quality of equipment that was available as well as the type of provision adopted; the latter refers to who taught languages, how often and which languages were delivered.

Teachers' attitudes towards language learning in general and ELL in particular as well as the role of ICT influenced the actions in relation to the degree of integration of both language and technology and actual pedagogical changes. Teachers' actions were also influenced by children's attitudes since if the reaction to ML lessons or particular integration of equipment was negative, they were likely to either diminish (or completely eliminate) language learning time and/or eliminate that particular type of equipment.

3.2. Training, support and skills

Formal and informal training both play an important role. When it comes to ML, the non-specialist teachers would quite often comment on their informal exposure to the language through family members and holiday trips as the source of contact with and knowledge of the language rather than formal qualifications obtained at secondary level. The generalists feel they do not have sufficient linguistic skills to confidently and effectively deliver the lessons. Hence, there is a general feeling of not being the right person for the job and over reliance on the specialists' expertise and assistance. With the funding for primary language training reduced, secondary school support proves to be an important factor here, as in order to ensure continuity, there needs to be closer collaboration between the subject leaders and other teachers.

When it comes to ICT, official training is no longer provided in the researched school as the generalist teachers feel fairly confident and proficient with the

technical aspects of the equipment. Any support offered relates to pedagogical aspects. The teachers admit that when it comes to ICT, “training on the job” is the best way of acquiring skills. This is why specialists feel less capable as they do not have the same amount of exposure as generalists for whom ICT –especially interactive whiteboards (IWBs)– is a part of their daily practice.

3.3. Logistics

Successful implementation of CALL relied on good logistical arrangements. Those referred to how teaching was organised around ICT, i.e. availability, placement and quality of available equipment and the arrangements around language provision in relation to both specialist and non-specialist teachers.

3.4. Pedagogy

A close comparison of specialist and non-specialist teachers’ lessons allowed to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each type of CALL provision. While specialist teachers have a clear linguistic advantage, they do not always have an understanding of primary teaching and primary context, especially in relation to overall curriculum knowledge, knowledge of subject specific methods, children’s individual needs and to some extent ICT skills. Lack of knowledge of children as individuals was quite transparent in the researched school and led to lack of differentiation at all stages as well as problems with behaviour.

Both specialists and non-specialists in the researched school used technology in a similar way which centred around plenary IWB use. The specialist admitted that she used the IWB because she felt most comfortable with it considering the limited amount of time she had to deliver a lesson, while non-specialists used the IWB as it made use of readily available resources with audio files which compensated for their limited language skills and lack of confidence and was simply considered a “job done”. Generalists quite often felt insecure moving away from the resource which resulted in “constrained” pedagogical CALL practice.

However, when observing non-specialists using technology in other subjects (those they were trained to teach), integration was much more varied and creative, incorporating group work, pair work as well as different technology types. This mix of tasks and variety of equipment was valued by the pupils who enjoyed plenary IWB use, but expressed a preference for autonomy rather than individual and pair interaction, which the equipment gave them. In the researched school, this usually took place in the ICT suite or when using mobile equipment. This three-

dimensional application was not widely utilised for ML, which in some instances led to pupils' dissatisfaction with CALL and ML lessons in general, especially when delivered by a specialist.

4. Conclusions

The study identified broader factors which impede normalisation in primary contexts. Those main themes related to attitudes, logistical solutions, training and support and pedagogy, and touched upon the problematic nature of primary language provision and general technological issues. Normalisation, then, needs to be redefined to accommodate the complexities of primary language context. While with EFL the language provision was taken for granted, the situation is not that clear in the primary ML. The subject will be mandatory from September 2014, this, however, does not eliminate the problems related to the quality of teaching that have only been partially addressed. Hence, before we speak of normalisation of primary CALL, we need to consider normalisation of technology and language provision separately.

The discussion of pedagogy centred around the type of knowledge (and what follows skills) that primary CALL practitioners should possess. Those include subject knowledge, subject specific methods of teaching, children's individual needs, practical and pedagogical ICT knowledge, curriculum knowledge and knowledge of age specific teaching methods. All these affect application of CALL and both specialist and non-specialist teachers at the researched school did not possess a full set of those skills. A primary trained teacher with ML subject specialism would be most likely to master all of them; however, with the dropping numbers of language entries, finding this type of teacher has become a sort of "quest for the holy grail". It is necessary to develop these skills in whomever undertakes language provision through enabling connectivist skills and knowledge exchange to fill in the current gap and allow for better technology use in language education. More practical work resulting from this research will attempt to achieve just that.

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