Is ICT really essential for learning? Perceptions and uses of ICTs for language acquisition in secondary level environments

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Abstract. Information and communications technology (ICT) has become an acknowledged and integral part of everyday life for many people. As research shows, the use of ICT in appropriate contexts in education can add value to teaching and learning by enhancing the effectiveness of learning itself and being a significant motivational factor in the students' acquisition process by supporting student's engagement with collaborative learning, and by promoting deep active lifelong learning (Barak, 2006; Lau & Sim, 2008). Despite all these significant benefits, it seems that ICT is not widely and successfully integrated into the educational system and consequently, its learning potential is not fully exploited. The purpose of this paper is to reflect and understand the current uses and expectations of ICT for learning in general and language learning in particular presenting some of the findings of a major case study. The results of this study are pertinent to future developments in school practice and national policies.

Keywords: ICT, education, language learning, post-primary education environments.

1. Introduction

ICT has become an essential part of most organizations and businesses these days and it has also gained a strong position in the educational field. The integration of ICT into the educational practice has had a rapid development in the past 20 years, obliging the schools to "re-think" and renovate their pedagogical approaches and to avail and exploit new technological resources. There are high expectations on

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ICT as, from a policy perspective, it holds the potential to sustain and promote competitiveness in the global market and, from an institutional one, it endorses a profound transformation in education (McGarr, 2009; Ottesen, 2006). As a consequence, a large number of education initiatives and research have been directed towards ICT integration in schools. One example is in Ireland, where the integration of ICT in post-primary schools was marked by the launch of the Schools IT2000 initiative. According to policy makers, the use of ICT in schools would offer important educational and pedagogical outcomes, beneficial for both teachers and students (OFSTED, 2002, 2004). Research indicates that the use of ICT in education can increase student's motivation, promote deep and collaborative understanding, facilitate lifelong learning, offer easy access to information and shared resources, and help students to think and communicate creatively (Jimoyiannis & Komis, 2007; Jonassen, 2000; Webb, 2005). Furthermore, students in technology-rich environments seem to perform better in the different subjects and ICT inclusion would encourage deep and interactive learning in a context where schools are more capable to respond effectively to the changing needs of todays' students (Barak, 2006; Lau & Sim, 2008).

Overall, ICT seems to support the modern principles of learning and, in our case, of language acquisition. Specifically, interaction, individualization, students' motivation and autonomy, often considered paramount in modern education theories, seem to perfectly mirror the ICT principles and processes. Despite all these significant benefits, it has been shown that ICT is often not widely and successfully integrated and where it is in place and available, there is no evidence that it has influenced teaching approaches (Levin & Wadmany, 2005). Many reasons have been given for the low level of ICT impact in the classroom. Among these are inadequate infrastructure, limited access to technology, lack of training and personal expertise, weak technical support, poor planning and teacher beliefs (Baek, Jung, & Kim, 2008; Ringstaff & Kelley, 2002). These barriers, together with the tools and benefits offered by new technologies, are some of the major aspects characterizing this research.

2. Method

2.1. Background information: settings and participants

The research reported here is part of a PhD project. This study employed a mixed-methods approach conducting semi-structured interviews together with surveys and classroom observations. The case study was conducted in two secondary schools, both located in the Munster region, Republic of Ireland. The first (School A) is a

mixed community school that offers progressive educational programs focusing particularly on science, languages, Information and Communication Technology and an overall commitment to innovation and heavy use of ICT in their pedagogies. Here, the majority of students are equipped with notebooks or tablet computers as are all of their teachers. The second school (School B) is a Catholic female school. In School B, the environment and the teaching reveal a more traditional book-based approach with small class sizes, a close teacher-students relationship, and limited access to one computer lab for all classes. The participants of the study were 2nd, 3rd, and 5th year students and their Italian and Irish language teachers.

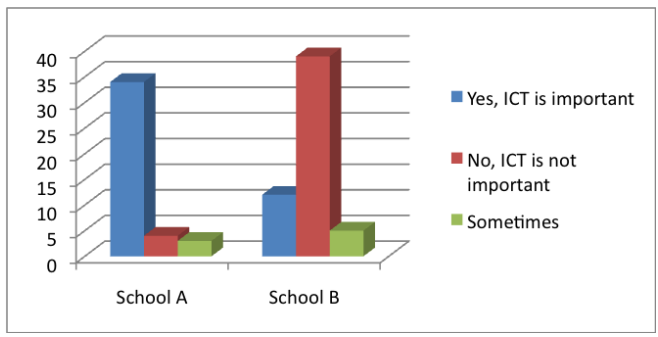
2.2. Data collection

The data elicitation phase lasted 18 weeks and started by asking the participants to complete a pre-interview survey to discover their perceptions and uses of ICT inside and outside the classroom. From the 12th to the 15th week, semi-structured and focus group interviews were held to investigate the students' and teachers' access and use of ICT focusing particularly on Irish and Italian learning and teaching. In this paper, I will introduce the data from the surveys and the related analysis in order to address some of the research concerns and consequently, offer future recommendations for teachers, learners, and second level institutions.

3. Discussion and conclusions

In the surveys provided, students of both secondary schools were asked to indicate how important the use of ICT in their institutions was.

Figure 1. Students' perceived importance of ICT



As shown in Figure 1, comparing the results of School A with School B, we have interestingly different perspectives. On one hand, the majority of School A

respondents (83%) openly addressed the importance of ICT in their institution as something being strongly emphasized and widely used for different subjects. Ten percent of the students reported that ICT was not as important as the school itself was stating but some teachers relied on it for teaching methods. The rest of the students (7%) argued that ICT was not essential in their learning process but it would definitely help in some cases and specific subjects.

On the other hand, the majority of School B respondents (70%) strongly stated that ICT was not important in their school primarily because the lack of resources and facilities available. Furthermore, students reported that books and traditional tools were regularly used for their learning. However, they felt that ICT should be promoted and used in their learning experience. Twenty-one percent of the respondents reported that ICT was important in their school especially for specific subjects; younger teachers used it for basic presentations or showing videos. Finally, 9% of the students stated that ICT was not important in their learning environment except in certain cases and specific subjects.

Students and teachers were then interviewed on the importance of ICT for Language Learning. In School A, more than half of students stated that ICT was important for their language learning process because it helped to investigate different methods of study by broadening the learning and making it easier. According to them, new technologies were important as a great source of information and an important support to rely on.

> "Yes, it is important; not all the information are in the book and it is very helpful to have technology to fall back on" (Male 5th year students).

Teachers confirmed the importance of ICT in their teaching recognizing, and at the same time, its limitations due to the extra time involved for training and preparing integrated technology lessons together with potential technical problems often encountered.

> "Very important. It is the conduit through which I can reach the students" (Male Irish Language Teacher).

In School B, ICT was not perceived as essential for language acquisition. During the Irish and Italian language classes, digital technologies were not used as students keenly relied on teachers and books for their learning. At home, some tools (mainly online dictionaries and translators) may be used independently by students as an extra support for their language activities.

> "In school we don't really use ICT resources during language classes. For me, at home, I do use the Internet to help me with languages" (Female 5th year student).

> "ICT is important however students do not always enjoy the use of ICT. Some students dislike Powerpoints and prefer if you do not use ICT" (Female, Irish Language Teacher).

The results of this study show that in both schools there was a general positive attitude but also the same concerns (i.e. accessibility and availability of resources) towards ICT inclusion even though the *technological orientation* was very different. Teachers favourably viewed ICT as a pedagogical device. However, many of them, especially in school B, are still not fully trained in the use of ICT. Consequently, they are reluctant to integrate it in their teaching. Finally, a strong sentiment echoed in both institutions revealing technology as an important and effective tool, but it was still not considered essential and central to the teaching and learning process. ICT seems to be often used as a backup for consolidating student learning and not as a way of preparing students for new knowledge acquisition.

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