

Using information and communication technologies to motivate young learners to practice English as a foreign language in Cyprus

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Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are continuously evolving and when integrated appropriately these can facilitate foreign language learning classes. Connecting the curriculum to real world tasks in this way prepares “learners for the challenge of coping with the language they hear and read in the real world outside the classroom” (Nunan, 2004, p.50). This paper discusses the use of ICT and the way it can motivate young learners of the age of 9–12, during their EFL classes, increasing their linguistic repertoire and developing their language skills. It also discusses how important it is for a teacher to be innovative, creating great opportunities for learning and without forgetting that “professional development must focus not only on how to use a particular hardware or software, but also on how it is used in alignment with more effective pedagogy, content, and context” (Li and Ni, 2010, p.120). Using ICT with a combination of interesting activities, motivating videos and songs through the use of the internet and the World Wide Web students can practice the target language, and be encouraged to become active explorers of language, whilst simultaneously gaining fluency.

Keywords: language learning, motivation, ICT, internet, young learners

Introduction

It has been suggested that schools risk becoming irrelevant, if teachers do not change their teaching methods and approaches. As Motteram, suggests technologies “have become central to language practice” (Motteram, 2013, p.5) and learners can take advantage of various activities

using technologies, to develop their understanding of language, creating in this way a positive impact on learning and resulting in more successful teaching. Teachers have to take into consideration that one of the most important aspects of EFL is learning how to communicate effectively in the foreign language and as Breen and Candlin assert (Breen and Candlin, 2001, p.11), “learning to communicate is a socialization process, it makes sense for the teacher to see the overall of language teaching as the development of the learners’ communicative knowledge in the context of personal and social development”.

Implementing ICT in the EFL learning process in the Cypriot young learners’ classroom helps learners enjoy a break from the traditional classroom. Since the newly adopted curriculum of the EFL Cypriot Primary State Education suggests, it is necessary to follow a more Communicative Approach. ICT could be a great teaching tool helping young learners practice foreign language and as a result develop their communicative competence. So teachers could select learning activities according to how well they engage the students in meaningful and authentic language use rather than in the merely mechanical practice of language patterns. Teachers have to be sensitive to their learners’ needs and be aware of new developments in pedagogy, embracing a stress-free environment, rich in language input, offered by online resources which can arm learners’ acquisition of fluency in spoken language. The use of online resources, would lead to an improvement in the standards of spoken English achieved by students.

Focussing on the emotions and its links with learning, ICT can become a very powerful learning tool since it “may contribute to creating powerful learning environments” (Smeets, 2005, p.344). Asking students to work with computers can help them relax and enjoy learning by providing a welcome change from the routine of classroom activity in learning a language. It can add variety into the classroom through the use of creative activities to replace current curriculum material and teaching styles that appear boring or not fully engaging. ICT can also be adjusted according to the learners’ strengths and most likely be appraised positively because it can make the language learning process more pleasant. The emotional significance of the use of ICT reflects Krashen’s (1985) *Affective Filter Hypothesis*, which argues that teachers can create a positive attitude towards learning, if they can succeed in lowering the *affective filter*, i.e. motivate the learner and put him or her at ease in order to build self-confidence.

As stated above, the use of ICT can arouse positive emotions, creating a positive attitude towards learning, lowering the affective filter, and as a result in creating optimum conditions for language learning. Since using computers and ICT have the benefit of being fun, and can reduce children’s anxiety, they can create an atmosphere for effective language learning and “an attitude in our learners that reflects genuine interest and motivation to learn the language” (Young, 1991, p.434). This relaxed atmosphere and the non-threatening environment can increase interest in learning the target language since students often think of computers as entertainment rather than study. Consequently, teachers can create a good learning environment allowing “learners to increase their interest, broaden their exposure to English, participate actively, and receive multiple forms of language support” (Reinders and Wattana, 2015, p.40). The harmonious combination of online environments with face-to-face learning, the so called blended learning, could allow teachers “not only capitalising on the advantages of each but also catering for diverse learning styles and the needs of different students” (Bilgin, 2013, p.207).

How can increasing anxiety be blocking students' motivation?

According to Khodadady and Khajavy "anxiety was found to be negatively related to motivation" (Khodadady and Khajavy, 2013, p.272). This interrelationship between anxiety and motivation is evident from the contention that by reducing anxiety, integrating ICT can help increase student interest and motivate them to learn the target language. As Shen (2009) states, motivation is vital in language learning and it can be "triggered by internal causes such as the learner's interest, enthusiasm and desire or by external influences such as peer pressure" (Shen, 2009, p.90). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p.119) reinforce the need to make tasks and activities engaging: "Making the tasks more interesting: this is probably the best-known motivational dimension of classroom teaching, and many practitioners would simply equate the adjective 'motivating' with 'interesting'" (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011, p.119). The teaching syllabus, therefore, needs to reflect students' interest, and follow the topics students want to learn so that "they regard the material they are taught as worth learning" (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011, p.116). Moreover the use of ICT and more specifically the use of the internet can encourage and motivate our students to become active explorers of language, gaining fluency since as Nunan suggests "information will be more deeply processed and stored if learners are given an opportunity to work things out for themselves, rather than simply being given the principle or rule" (Nunan, 2001, p.196).

Since children learn better if teachers give them interesting activities to work with, our aim as teachers is to help them "learn in an enjoyable environment without making them feel the pressure of learning a foreign language" (Ara, 2009, p.168). This involves "tailoring activities to the affective needs of the learner" (Young, 1991, p.433), using classroom procedures and strategies which "pay off in terms of low anxiety, high motivation, and ultimately in the ability to convey information and communicate ideas and feelings" (Young, 1991, p.426).

According to Yan and Horwitz (2008, p.153), anxiety can be a very important variable in terms of "influencing language achievement" having a negative effect on motivation, as their study revealed "some students reported that anxiety actually made them lose interest in learning English" (Yan and Horwitz, 2008, p.161). Bearing in mind Horwitz's contention that "many people find foreign language learning especially in classroom situations, particularly stressful" (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986, p.125), ICT could reduce anxiety and help students with their language learning, through creating an enjoyable learning atmosphere which would make learning both grammar and vocabulary not only effective, but easier and more fun, lowering the "affective barriers and subsequently promote more opportunities for learners to become willing to communicate and thus use more L2" (Reinders and Wattana, 2015, p.39).

The use of ICT can be a great chance for reducing students' anxiety. ICT could give students the opportunity to work with each other, feel comfortable and more confident since they "represent not only a useful means for learning language, but also the main medium in which they will actually use their second language in everyday life" (Chirimbou and Tafazoli, 2013, p.187). Moreover using ICT "can result in increased participation and language learning" (Crandall, 1999, p.227), moving away from the more traditional, teacher-centred classrooms and helping students to get rid of "the frustration of not having adequate language to express their ideas or emotions" (Crandall, 1999, p.227).

ICT may also prevent children from feeling a lack of interest or under pressure in the language class. This is particularly important given that "because of their short attention **285**

spans, children cannot concentrate on tedious activities for long durations” (Ara, 2009, p.163). Moreover computers are ‘patient’ and non-judgemental and as such they can put even the most nervous students at ease giving them myriad of ways for gaining fluency and naturalness in spoken English – a preeminent badge of success in learning the language.

Fun and enjoyment created through the use of information and communication technology (ICT)

The use of ICT can support English language lessons, helping teachers to adopt innovative approaches in order to “meet the needs of the young technocrats growing up within an increasingly globalised world” (Pim, 2013, p.17). Having a Computer-Language Lab in our school gave my students the advantage of using the internet and generally ICT during their language lesson. It was observed that having students working in pairs on one computer made the lesson a lot more enjoyable giving them the chance to practice language, develop interpersonal skills and as Nicolson, Adams, Furnborough, Adinolfi and Truman state “this can be a source of great satisfaction, demonstrating that you have succeeded in communicating, and encouraging you to progress further” (2005, p.38). Most children seem to enjoy using the internet, but it is important for teachers to take on board that computers are more than just enjoyment.

Young learners develop from an early stage digital skills enabling them to participate in technology-driven activities. According to Peterson “the enjoyment and pleasure engendered by undertaking play not only elicits a high degree of involvement, it can also result in learning” (Peterson, 2013, p.35). Furthermore Butler, Someya and Fukuhara, studying computer games as part of CALL, state that “games can be effective for enhancing users’ learning and understanding of complex subjects” (Butler, Someya and Fukuhara, 2014, p.266). Shield, Rossade, Rosell-Aguilar and Beaven state that “CALL materials often offer you the opportunity to compare your own spoken and written performance with spoken and written models” (2005, p.168) making students a lot more interested in using computers within their educational context for oral practice, reading and writing skills development.

As Pim states the internet can provide access to large quantities of authentic input material giving our students the opportunity to practice language, “a rich source of authentic oral models via recorded songs, talking electronic books, podcasts and video clips that help learners with pronunciation as well as acquisition and reinforcement of new vocabulary” (Pim, 2013, p.22) can be found online. It is obvious that young learners need to be offered many challenging opportunities to practice the target language and as a teacher “you can choose from the activities, adapting them to your own context and confidence level, as you begin integrating digital literacies with your teaching of language and conventional literacy skills” (Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum, 2013, p.42) equipping your students with the competencies they will need to participate in a digitally networked economy and society.

Since most children enjoy listening to songs we can engage their interest by implementing songs and interesting activities with the help of ICT, which can be “a welcome change from the routine of learning a foreign language” (Millington, 2011, p.134). Additionally, “can play an important role in the development of language in young children learning a second language” (Millington, 2011, p.134), helping the teacher to add to students’ enthusiasm as they gain confidence. Navigating through websites like <http://www.beatlesstory.com/timeline> teachers can offer students ample opportunities to work with interesting tasks and meaningful learning experiences allowing them to easily explore interesting

subjects experiencing learning through a fun and easy way. Moreover, students, according to Šišková, “relate to songs as part of entertainment rather than work” (Šišková, 2008, p.25), and, as a result, find learning through songs amusing and stimulating rather than boring. Moreover as Diakou mentions, “pop songs in particular, which are part of youth culture, can stimulate learning and improve knowledge” (Diakou, 2013, p.36) or “play an associative facilitating role in engaging and stimulating” (Murphey, 1992, p.774) students’ interest in language learning. The relaxed atmosphere created by the implementation of song and ICT into the EFL teaching process can create an environment which can help students forget they are practicing their language skills and think that they are just enjoying themselves keeping in mind what Ara has stated that “although children have an innate ability to learn a language they do not learn properly if they find their lessons boring and unexciting” (Ara, 2009, p.168).

Chat, audio and video conferencing

Students are growing up in a digital world and it is apparent that ICT has the power to reinforce and utterly transform their learning. Though we acknowledge the internet more as a pool of information, it also has other significant roles to play in our lives. Good internet access enables students to communicate with each other at a distance, bringing native speakers into contact with non-native speakers supporting in this way co-operative projects. As Dudeney et al. state the younger generation being more technologically adept “are driven to connect with their peers online as a result of increasingly heavily scheduled and protected lives” (Dudeney et al., 2013, p.10). Consequently, with the help of the Internet, instant communication with other individuals allows for an interpersonal exchange with a friend around the corner or around the world. Such real-time communication takes place via several different types of chat, conferencing, and messaging programs. Such applications can enable synchronous “conversation” among participants anywhere in the world. Students can join forums and communities and can interact with people around the globe communicating with distant native speakers and improving in this way their oral and intercultural skills. This will give them an opportunity to learn about their language and their cultural nuances.

Audio and video conferencing programs, such as Skype and others similar, are options through which foreign language students can engage in voice conversation. Users can talk directly to their interlocutor and, using the proper hardware and software, can even see and be seen by the person they are addressing. Messaging software such as AOL, MSN or Yahoo provide an instant connection to the people on a user’s list of contacts by letting the user know when those people are online. These programs facilitate quick communication by making a connection to an individual as easy as clicking on a name thereby making it possible for the students to communicate directly with native speakers in target language environments. Students of age 9–12, of intermediate level, can easily get to know how to use all these in their personal and social lives in and outside the classroom.

Blogs and websites

Similarly with blogs, learners can even set their personal blogging writing “posts at regular intervals in order to create a portfolio of written work” (Dudeney et al., 2013, p.336) on topics of their personal interest using simple websites like www.wallwisher.com. Students

can share ideas with their friends on different subjects even on other websites like www.glogster.com and www.blogger.com where they can create their own posters and blogs for uploading their work.

The web also serves as an instructional delivery medium. Numerous web sites provide digital educational activities and network based courses for all grade levels in a large number of subjects. Web-based learning gives students the freedom to explore a diverse range of topics, from a variety of global sources. Websites like www.storybird.com can help students to get inspired by a great selection of images creating their own stories and even work together with students from other countries practicing both vocabulary and grammar since it can allow students to develop their own stories, use the language they were taught and then add images they choose from a very big variety. The internet seems to be a great source of this authentic language learning material leading to an improvement of both the spoken and written English achieved by our students.

Streaming audio and video techniques

It seems that we are moving away “from rigidly structured classrooms, with their immovable rows of desks facing the teacher” (Dudeny et al., 2013, p.338). Teachers are now working even within online flexible spaces where students can get connected with native speakers and authentic AV materials by using streaming audio and video technologies, which virtually transports the target language environment to the second language classroom without waiting for very large files to download. Real Player and Windows Media Player are some of the streaming formats, and both can be freely downloaded. Even very young learners who cannot read or write very well can be “audio-recorded singing songs or chants, or being filmed performing movement songs” (Dudeny et al., 2013, p.333) creating their own language portfolio. Alternatively, we could offer them the chance to play different audio-visual language learning games keeping them motivated and interested in the language learning process but at the same time practicing in a fun way both their new vocabulary and grammar. Websites like www.voki.com and <http://www.zimmertwins.com/> can engage students’ interest allowing them to create their own customized speaking characters or their own short movies enhancing their language skills.

Young states that “affect (as in anxiety, motivation, empathy, and attitude) could significantly influence the language learning process” (Young, 1999, p.20). This comes to add to Shen’s notion that “affective learning is also effective learning” (Shen, 2009, p.90). It may be, then, that engaging students in affective learning activities will lead to learning outcomes that include new grammar structures and new vocabulary. It is not, therefore, enough just to use ICT but it is important, to employ a variety of interesting activities and through their richness, to sustain students’ attention and provide purposeful activities to improve grammar and vocabulary. A teacher should attempt, therefore, through the use of motivational techniques, to present and administer tasks and activities so that even simple grammatical substitution drills can be made exciting. However given that motivation is not “stable but changes dynamically over time as a result of personal progress” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p.198) we have to be flexible and use a variety of different activities in order to keep our students’ interest for language learning.

Students can be exposed to a wide range of resources such as online dictionaries and translation software helping them to develop their vocabulary and furthermore gain language fluency since as Shield, et al., (2005, p.171) state some of these dictionaries allow you

to “listen to the pronunciation of a word, and sometimes even select the regional accent you want to listen to”. Moreover they can have access to up-to-date information on every new and interesting topic allowing the teacher to shift from textbooks to real life experiences stimulating class discussion and creating an atmosphere that will lead to effective language learning and “an attitude in our learners that reflects genuine interest and motivation to learn the language” (Young, 1991, p.434).

Concerns and difficulties caused by the use of ICT

It is evident from all of the above mentioned that there are many benefits from the use of ICT in language learning which makes it a valuable teaching tool. A teacher though needs to take care in selecting a suitable activity, considering the teaching purpose and taking into consideration the fact that it might not be the most appropriate for the given group of students. Researchers like Shin express concerns about using technology and mostly the internet in the language classroom stating among others that “if online materials are used without critical review of their suitability, there is a risk that teachers will present inaccurate, inappropriate, or even dangerous content to learners” (Shin, 2015, p.182). It is important to make sure before using ICT in the classroom that activities are suitable for our students, since there could be problems caused by difficult language or unsuitable pictures online. Consequently, a teacher considering using activities and other material from the internet should consider carefully the vocabulary and pictures before using it in the EFL classroom. It is important also to keep in mind that the use of ICT will not be unproblematic, and that we should be aware of the fact that we do not need great expertise to effectively teach with it but we do need to be careful with our choice since whatever we choose has to be suitable for the age-group concerned and their English language competence level. Regardless of the enjoyment ICT could bring to a classroom, in order for it to be effective as EFL teaching material, the teacher must consider whether there are words that might be inappropriate or unsuitable for learners, and adapt according to the students’ needs and interests, which can take considerable time and effort.

It is also important not to be forgotten, however, that some students might be distracted by the use of ICT. Some students are easily excited, make unwanted noises, and create a disturbance and distraction for other students in class who find it difficult to concentrate. The use of technical equipment, as suggested by Murphey (1992, p.8) can alleviate this problem, since if each student has his or her own headset, for instance can minimise unwanted noise as well as help students concentrate while working.

In addition, there are other difficulties facing the teacher in selecting and using the appropriate activities. Since he or she needs to maintain variety in the classroom, the teacher needs a good repertoire of different activities. Children do not like using the same activities on several occasions and become easily bored. A teacher should take into account that no matter how enjoyable activities are, they “will not teach anyone to use the language, and will not give students the ability to communicate in another language” (Millington, 2011, p.137), if not used wisely and appropriately having specific language aims. Teachers need to study which technologies and what kind of activities they have to use in their classroom and always preview and evaluate if this teaching material can serve their teaching goals. They have to make a detailed lesson plan and always revisit websites shortly before each lesson to ensure that links are not broken. Consequently, a teacher can never plan a

whole lesson around a single site and make sure that there is always a stand-by plan in case of connection or other problems accessing the website.

Reflections and conclusions

The aim of most teachers is to enable students to engage in successful spoken exchanges with other speakers of the target language, which requires learning to use new vocabulary and grammar structures they have been taught. As Burns suggests, “in relation to English language teaching, this aim is inevitable in an increasingly mobile world where native and non-native speakers of the language will need to communicate across national borders” (Burns, 2009, p.123). Since speaking plays a significant role in daily communication and educational process students must learn to function effectively as speakers using appropriately both grammar and vocabulary. As we have mentioned earlier there are many EFL activities which can prepare students for successful speaking and writing by implementing authentic listening/speaking/writing materials in the EFL classes.

It is apparent that children today need something more than traditional teaching methods. They need to be in a learning situation which does not make them feel uncomfortable or under pressure. The use of ICT could indeed be “a source of motivation, interest and enjoyment” (Ara, 2009, p.170) and, furthermore this “favourable environment, useful resources, carefully structured input and practice opportunities” (Ara, 2009, p.169) could create a positive learning atmosphere leading to more effective grammar and vocabulary learning. Finally it seems from all the above mentioned that implementing ICT in the language learning process can stimulate “the creative and motivational regions of the brain” (Campbell, 1997, p.27) creating an effective learning atmosphere and generating interested students.

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