

ICT education and motivating elderly people

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Abstract

To make language learning more effective and help teachers attain their objectives, different teaching tools and aids have been suggested. Indeed, the research literature has witnessed an increasing interest in finding out what can make from the language classroom to make it a stimulating learning atmosphere, where a variety of teaching supports are provided. This is because the teachers' role is no longer limited to their talk, the use of textbooks and the board, but rather, it requires more flexibility in teaching to match learners' learning needs and styles. Therefore, e-learning has been widely implemented to help teachers attain this objective. Nevertheless, introducing technological tools in the classroom may be conceived as a threat by some teachers, instead of a supporting language means. This may occur mostly in case where teaching concerns elderly people in a given educational context. Indeed, integrating such tools and achieving the intended objectives behind their use may be hindered by these learners' lack of technical skills, unfamiliarity or fear to deal with them. Thus, teachers are more likely to be confronted with a set of challenges in teaching elderly people using ICT. As a result, motivation may not be attained and learners may get deprived from the benefits which this learning mode can provide. Thus, the question which remains addressed in this respect is how to integrate ICT more effectively in teaching languages to elderly people, while overcoming the different risks associated with its use? In an attempt to answer this question, this paper introduces a set of practical teaching suggestions which aim at helping teachers motivate elderly people into the use of ICT within lifelong learning contexts. These suggestions concern English language teaching, but they are not exclusively limited to it, as they can be implemented in different teaching contexts. They arrange from raising learners' awareness and making them more familiar with using ICT to promoting their motivation in and reflection over language learning.

Keywords: motivation, ICT in language learning, e-learning tools, elderly people

Resumen

Para hacer el aprendizaje de idiomas más eficaz y ayudar a los profesores a lograr sus objetivos, se han sugerido diferentes herramientas y medios didácticos. De hecho, la literatura de investigación ha sido testigo de un creciente interés en saber lo que se puede hacer desde el aula de idiomas para ser un ambiente de aprendizaje estimulante, donde se proporcionan una variedad de apoyos didácticos. Esto se debe a que el rol de los profesores ya no se limita a su discurso, el uso de libros de texto y la pizarra, sino, más bien, se requiere de una mayor flexibilidad en la enseñanza para que coincida con las necesidades de los alumnos y estilos de aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, el e-learning ha sido ampliamente aplicado para ayudar a los profesores a alcanzar este objetivo. Sin embargo, la introducción de herramientas tecnológicas en el aula puede ser concebida como una amenaza por algunos profesores, en lugar de un medio de soporte de idioma. Esto puede ocurrir sobre todo en el caso de las preocupaciones de enseñar a personas mayores en un contexto educativo determinado. De hecho, la integración de estas herramientas y la consecución de los objetivos previstos tras su uso puede verse obstaculizado por la falta de conocimientos técnicos, desconocimiento o miedo de

tratar con ellos por parte de estos alumnos. Por lo tanto, los profesores tienen más probabilidades de ser confrontados con una serie de desafíos en la enseñanza de personas mayores que utilizan las TIC. Como resultado, la motivación no puede ser alcanzada y los alumnos pueden desfavorecerse de los beneficios que este modo de aprendizaje puede proporcionar. Por lo tanto, la pregunta que sigue siendo tratada en este sentido es ¿cómo integrar las TIC con mayor eficacia en la enseñanza de idiomas para las personas mayores, mientras se superan los distintos riesgos asociados con su uso? En el intento de responder a esta pregunta, este artículo presenta un conjunto de sugerencias para la enseñanza práctica que tiene como objetivo ayudar a los profesores a motivar a las personas mayores en el uso de las TIC en el contexto del aprendizaje permanente. Estas recomendaciones se aplican en la enseñanza del idioma inglés, pero no se limitan exclusivamente a este idioma, ya que se pueden aplicar en diferentes contextos de enseñanza. Se organiza la sensibilización de alumnos y la familiarización con el uso de las TIC para la promoción de la motivación y la reflexión sobre el aprendizaje de idiomas.

Palabras clave: motivación, Las TIC en el aprendizaje de idiomas, herramientas de e-learning, personas mayores.

1. Introduction

Within a fast changing world where renewing and acquiring skills is required, lifelong learning has become a pre-requisite to cope with this change. Indeed, this process appeals to “all aspects of life and meets a variety of needs and objectives” (Freyer, 1997: 29). Thus, learning has become no longer limited by time or space, but rather it has gone beyond such boundaries to provide a variety of choices which make learning opportunities more accessible. In fact, the increasing interest in implementing ICT in learning has extended such opportunities, thereby promoting the culture of lifelong learning for all. As a matter of fact, elderly people, regardless of their age, can continue their learning process. However, despite the benefits of learning technologies, ICT literacy is still low among the older age group as studies have shown (Eurostat, 2007). Therefore, how can language teachers motivate elderly people through the use of ICT?. In attempt to answer this question the following tips are suggested.

2. Needs analysis

There is a common consensus that integrating ICT in language teaching can be quite motivating and interesting for language learners. Hence, teachers may not attain such benefit and get the intended result out of their use. Instead, their intentions and plans may get restrained in case of learners' reluc-

tance and negative attitudes toward these learning tools. This need becomes crucial in case of elderly people since they may be alienant to the world of technology. For that purpose, teachers need to know and understand their learners' learning styles, preferences, needs as well as technical skills, through conducting needs analysis (administering a questionnaire or interviewing them).

It is worth stating in this respect that elderly people are more conscious of their own needs and they look forward to accomplishing them. This implies that teachers should meet such needs and adjust their teaching accordingly. A needs analysis is suggested here for elderly people who are learning English for a given purpose. In case learners have never learnt English before this needs analysis can be translated into their first language. This analysis aims at unveiling: learners language level, their learning interests and preferences and their ICT skills.

3. Selecting the e-learning tool and deciding its content

As stated previously, teachers need to be aware of learners' ICT skills in order to select the e-learning tool and determine the type of training required. Yet, elderly people should not get involved in complex software which demand sophisticated technical skills and additional learners' efforts. Besides, these learners should not be introduced to lan-

guage tasks which require more cognitive abilities such as working memory, reasoning and speed of processing information as these decline with age. Also, their problems with physical health (hearing, sight, etc.) need to be considered by teachers. This is because research has shown that such problems are likely to make them lose their self-confidence which is among the learning barriers for elderly people (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the selected e-learning tool should cater for learners' needs so that they conceive their use as a worthwhile task for their learning. This is because elderly people are not interested in ICT for its own sake, nor are they keen of experiencing its latest or newest innovations as the youth. Their interest in these tools is related to the objective they intend to achieve through their use. In this respect, Boulton-Lewis et al. (2006) found that elderly people are interested in learning to know about issues related to their personal well-being such as health and safety. Therefore, teachers can select these topics, design language activities and tasks on them and introduce them using the right e-learning tool(s).

Moreover, teachers need to bear in mind that learners' motivation and interest need to be sustained and maintained along their learning process. So, they should not load them with a lot of input, and make them feel tired and bored. Instead, the course content needs to vary and include different tasks which are of interest to these learners. The language should not be too difficult nor easy to deal with. Certain language level is required which allows challenge and competition among learners.

4. Integrating ICT into language teaching

After selecting the e-learning tool and deciding its content, the next step is to introduce it to the learners. Whether it is delivered online or face-to-face teachers need to motivate them through promoting their involvement in and reflection over their learning. But, how can this objective be achieved?

A. First teachers need to make the e-learning tool familiar to learners through training them into their use. This training involves:

- Raising their awareness of the e-learning mode of use, its objective and relation to their own learning needs.
- Providing them with models of implementation and with enough time to practice and experience it by their own.
- Enhancing their self-confidence along providing instructions through convincing them that they can develop the necessary skills to use properly this technology.
- Listening to their inquiries and providing them with the necessary feedback and support.
- Making sure with the institution that learners can have easy access to technology without encountering technical difficulties.

B. ICT needs to be integrated with other traditional materials. There are some coursebooks which contain other extra resources materials such as CDs, audio cassettes, DVD materials, etc. Since these extra materials are designed within each unit of the course book and they are shown clearly in teacher's guides, integrating them may not be difficult for teachers to achieve. Hence, following the same units and lessons as they are designed within the coursebook can make teachers and learners de-motivated, besides the topic may not be of interest to students or culturally appropriate (Harmer, 2007).

Therefore, being flexible and not relying entirely on the coursebook is necessary. The teacher can decide which tasks/lessons to omit and which to maintain or change and which extra materials to design instead of the one already proposed. Thus, whether the coursebook contains e-learning materials or not, there is always a need for teacher's innovation since the latter can make his/her teaching interesting and admired by his learners and more likely to achieve the intended objectives of the course.

However, the e-learning tool needs to support the traditional materials or vice versa. Learners are likely to get confused if there is no link or common objective of the materials they are exposed to. For example, teachers can teach their learners how to ask for permission in English through introducing the language needed to express this function.

Then, he/she can make them listen to a podcast where asking for permission examples are provided at the BBC Learning English website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk>

C. Teachers need to provide opportunities for learners' interaction in the classroom. This is because interaction is likely to raise their motivation as Arnold says (1999: 178):

....discovering what you are really like and being that self are two highly motivating forces. Indeed, the most fascinating subject we can learn about and talk about is ourselves. And we learn about ourselves through others. So communication which satisfies these deep innate needs develops from sharing about ourselves while others actively listen to us, showing understanding and accepting us as we are.

This is through involving learners in collaborative tasks using social software like blogs, wikis, encouraging them to talk and share their life experience with the others. In fact studies have displayed that older people want to participate in learning as a way of giving back to society to use their skills and share their knowledge with others (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006). Thus, learners need to feel free to share their ideas, talk and express their views in English to get a sense of confidence in themselves.

Besides, older people need to feel that they are contributing with their learning to others as well and

that they are still having a role to play in society. As a matter of fact, asking them to work together, involving them in projects using ICT, writing plays, stories in English and sending them via email, or posting them in their blogs, recording themselves using podcasts, etc., these tasks are likely to motivate them since they enhance their interaction. Also, praising and rewarding them along are useful to realize that aim.

5. Conclusion

Teaching languages to elderly people through ICT can be interesting and motivating. Yet, this requires teachers' awareness of their own learning needs, preferences and ICT skills. Therefore, a needs analysis can help understand the type of learners teachers have. Besides, training learners and making them familiar with learning technologies is worth considering in this case. The e-learning tool needs to be linked with other traditional materials to support them and make teaching more flexible.

In addition to that, enhancing learners' interaction is also crucial to achieve their motivation. Yet, motivating learners cannot be achieved if teachers are not motivated. Therefore, teachers need to show to their learners that they like what they are doing and they care about their success. This is done through providing them with support and listening to their own voices.

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Needs Analysis: Would you please Tick the right box which reflects your answer.

- I. How do you find learning English?.
 - a. Difficult. b. Easy. c. In between.
- II. Why are you learning English?.
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- III. Which language area you need to improve?.
 - a. Speaking. b. Reading c. Writing d. Listening and understanding
- IV. Which topics you prefer to learn and talk about in the English classroom?.
 - a. Politics b. Sport c. Science d. Social issues
 - b. Others, please mention them.....
- V. Which materials you prefer to use in the classroom?.
 - a. Computers with internet access.
 - b. Computers without internet access.
 - c. Books
 - d. CDs and Audio files.
 - e. Interactive whiteboard.
 - f. Others
- VI. Describe what you can do with learning technologies (ICT):
 - a. I can use computers well
 - b. I can write emails and send them.
 - c. I can chat to friends via skype.
 - d. I can research through the net and retrieve the information needed.
 - e. I can download podcasts and listen to them on my computer.
 - f. I can connect with the others through facebook and /twitter.
 - g. I can create my own blog.
 - h. Other things you can do?.please mention them.....
- VII. How do you think ICT can help learners improve their English?.Is it through:
 - a. Listening to podcasts.
 - b. Writing and reading emails.
 - c. Chatting to friends.
 - d. Reading news or newspapers on the net.
 - e. Practicing English through websites like the BBC English website.
 - f. Others?.....
- VIII. According to you how can teachers help their learners learn English through ICT?.
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Figure 1. Need Analysis Questionnaire