INTEGRATING ICT IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM IN EXTREMADURA (SPAIN)

Carmen Galván Malagón
Professor PHD., University of
Extremadura, Spain
mcgalvan@unex.es

Abstract

The regional government of Extremadura opted for an ambitious programme to introduce ICT at all levels, administration, hospitals and schools with the creation of an Intranet connecting 1,478 centres of the regional administration, including all schools.

Since 2000, one of the most outstanding actions has been to provide a computer for every two pupils in state secondary schools which puts Extremadura at the head of ICT in Europe where ratio pupil/computer is concerned.

Nevertheless the results are disappointing and this work aims at establishing the reasons for the failure to normalize the use of computers, specifically in the English language classroom.

In the first place the motives behind the development of this research topic and the objectives of the same have been examined. Then, in order to understand the educational panorama in which our study is centred, a description of the role of ICT in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Secondary Schools in Extremadura, is provided.

Keywords: ICT, English as a foreign language, Secondary Education, attitudes, teachers.

Introduction

In the last few years there has been an important reform in the syllabus of the education system and in the educational role of teachers who have had to learn to integrate ICT in their teaching practices.

Since 2000 education is the responsibility of the Autonomous Government of Extremadura and from the beginning they proposed the introduction of a computer for every two students in all the state secondary schools. At the same time the teaching of English was introduced for all pupils from the age of three. However, despite the fact that the circumstances in which the teaching/learning process is carried out, both in ICT and in foreign languages, are very positive, one of the hypotheses on which our study is based is that we cannot talk about what Bax (2003) calls "*normalization*", even after nearly ten years of profound change in the education system. Normalization would occur in the moment that ICT was used in the same way as the rest of the resources with which we are accustomed to work with in the classroom, such as the blackboard, the textbook and which he describes as "*the stage when the technology becomes invisible, taken for granted in everyday life, embedded in everyday practice and hence "normalized" to the extent that we hardly even recognize them as Technologies*" (Bax, 2003:23)

The idea of this research also follows one of Bax's (2003) proposals which claims that in order to carry out the process of normalization of language teaching via the computer *"we also need action research in individual environments to identify barriers to normalization and ways of overcoming them"* (Bax, 2003:27).

Another of our hypotheses is related to the fact that one of the principal obstacles for the production of normalization of ICT in English teaching is teachers' attitudes towards them, marked in many cases by fear of expressing opinions about ICT or of admitting the use they actually make of them in the classroom. To admit that they do not use them nor possess the necessary training to integrate them in their teaching could be considered in many cases as something "politically incorrect". McGinity (2002) considers in this sense the conflict between what teachers really believe about the use of ICT in the classroom and what they consider that society demands..

We believe that teachers are afraid to admit that in many cases *"ICT was being used by schools mainly to teach ICT skills"* (Somekh, 2004: 167), or that part of the money employed in buying so many computers would have been better spent on other types of resources such as a reduction of the pupil/teacher ratio per class, or that teachers receive a training which is specific, practical and adequate to the educational reality where ICT is concerned. We needed to reflect on whether there is any truth in the claims of authors like Wager (1992: 454), when he claims that *"educational technology that can make the biggest difference to schools and students is not the hardware, but the process of designing effective instruction"*.

Another of the points to be considered is that despite the successive educational reforms, the organizational structure of schools has not changed in aspects such as school and teaching organization, the participation and integration of the educational community in the school project, school times, the professional career of teachers or the participation of parents in the educational tasks of pupils. Like Buckingham et al (2001), we consider that the rigidity of the education system, which has not altered significantly during a large part of the twentieth century, is one of the possible causes for the failure of the implementation of ICT and that *"educational reforms often fail to have much lasting impact because they do little to change the institutional character of the school"* (Buckingham et al, 2001:20). The theory that one of the principal obstacles for the integration of ICT in education are the barriers existing at the system level, also appears in Martínez and Correa (2009) who claim that the norms and the rigid structure which dominate the system, among which they highlight the timetable, examinations, the clear division into subjects, the criteria used for the different materials imparted, etc, prevent the integration of ICT in teaching and block the possibilities of success in their implementation. The whole weight of education falls exclusively on teachers of whom it is demanded that they educate for the 21st century without in many cases the possibility of being trained for it. In this sense, Somekh (2004), basing her arguments on one of the theories on which Bidwell (2001), depended for his analysis, claims that:

> *the institutional structure of schools, consisting of a hierarchy of bureaucratic roles and divisions of the teaching force into subgroups, according to subject discipline and age phase, combined with the strength of external threats (e.g. high-stakes testing and inspection regimes), constructs the informal networks of teachers as mechanisms that are increasingly expert in adapting externally imposed innovations to existing practices* (Somekh, 2004: 168)

The rigidness of the educational system and the attitude of the teachers constitute a barrier to the incorporation of ICT in schools. According to Somekh (2004),the resistance teachers show to integrate ICT in their teaching practice is based on some deeply-rooted facts of the educational system, as the division of knowledge in different subjects, or the division of each class period in short timeframes. We sometimes send our students contradictory messages, and Somekh (2004) criticizes that on the one hand the use of ICT is promoted, but on the other hand there are rules which limit its use, as for example the banning of mobile phones, computer games or some Web pages, which teachers consider to be out of place in school.

Bax (2009) uses Vygotsky's mediation model to explain the normalization of ICT in the teaching of languages, According to this, the development of the child's higher mental processes can only be explained in terms of social interaction and cultural engagement with the group we belong to. For that reason, it is very complicated to separate ICT from the identity of the human beings who use it. Summarizing, ICT will not have an impact on the teaching-learning process until there are significant changes among all the members of the educational organisation, both at pedagogical level and in the structure of the current educative system.

Teachers are responsible for integrating ICT in their classes because they are the ones who have to manage these changes once they close the door of their classrooms to start each working day.

Methodology

A quantitative study was carried out with a total of 112 questionnaires, 96 from teachers of English as a foreign language in state schools and 16 teachers in state supported private schools in the province of Badajoz. Each questionnaire consisted of 46 items divided into two parts. The first 23 items, on a decreasing Likert scale, considered computers and the use teachers make of them in the classroom. The second part consisted of personal data, and questions about the use of technological resources, frequency of their use in the classroom and the degree to which teachers are prepared to innovate by integrating ICTs in their teaching.

The study also provides a qualitative analysis based on in-depth, semi- structured interviews of 16 teachers in the Province of Badajoz, 14 from state schools and 2 from state supported private schools. The topics centered on the integration of ICTs in the English classroom, the training of teachers in this area, the use of computers in the classroom, considerations as regards their distribution, the duration of lesson periods and the existing English syllabus at these levels.

Finally, the results of both were analyzed, their triangulation with the conclusions of two official documents (*Document for Reflection and Debate on Education in Extremadura* (2005), and the second at national level, *Information and Communication Technologies in Education: Panorama of the implantation and use of ICT in Spanish Secondary Schools*, published in 2006) was carried out and suggestions for improvement were provided, with the idea of achieving the normalization of ICT in the English classroom in those cases where it is considered necessary and desirable. This analysis centres on: the training of teachers and the teaching of English; ICT and motivation of pupils in the English class; the normalization of ICT in English teaching, materials and applications for the teaching of English and finally ICT and their integration in the English language syllabus.

Results

In this article we present some of the data obtained from the triangulation of the overall results of the questionnaires; secondly we comment on the data proceeding from the interviews and then, with the most relevant data from the *Document for Reflection and Debate in Secondary Education in Extremadura* (2005). We have concentrated on the principal points which constitute the objectives of our research study which are: Teacher training and English teaching; ICT and the motivation of students in the English classroom; Normalization of ICT in the teaching of English; Material and computer applications for teaching English, and finally ICT and the integration into the curriculum of teaching English.

1. Teacher training and English teaching

The majority of the English teachers (60%) consider that they have little or no preparation for using ICT in the classroom, given that they have received no training at university nor in the postgraduate teacher training course (CAP), and little or badly focused training during their professional life.

There is an even larger number of teachers (70%) who consider that their competence in LinEX is very limited. I must mention at this point that Extremadura uses in all its applications the free operative system, LinEX. They associate the lack of confidence in using ICT with the occasional loss of authority in the classroom as they claim their pupils often have more computer knowledge than they have.

In general, the teachers believe that they have adequate material resources but lack the necessary preparation, among other reasons because the offer of practical courses is inadequate. Teachers even claim that there is too high a number of computers in the classroom compared to a deficient training of teachers in this area and a shortage of human resources.

2. Motivation of students.

Many teachers (54%) believe that the use of computers motivates students only as an initial novelty, which suggests that the pupils welcome the use of the computer with considerable interest at first but that this motivation diminishes when they become accustomed to its use.

They claim that ICT helps them control the problems of discipline in the classroom, due to the fact that students feel more motivated to work with a new instrument, and are therefore more settled; but at the same time it is more difficult to get them to concentrate on the language tasks, since they tend to open applications dedicated to games and leisure such as playing computer games, checking their emails or chatting. It is necessary to reflect here about the use that students make of the computer and highlight the fact that the majority of students are habitual users of computers for entertainment activities such as chats or games. If we consider the difficulties adults have in not falling into the temptation to use the computer for other ends that are not strictly work relate, what can we say about children or adolescents?

The overall feeling is that the use of ICT has not improved the performance of the students in learning English. In the *Document on Reflection and Debate on Secondary Education in Extremadura* (2005), teachers criticize the excessive preoccupation with ICT, compared to the importance which should be given to other deficiencies in the system.

3. Normalization of ICT

Normalization has been achieved at an administrative level, given that the management of the documents related to the pupils, calling the registers, communication of incidents to the head of studies from the classroom, or correspondence with the parents is carried out via the computer. The main problem is that the use of ICT has not been normalized in the teaching of English, above all because the teachers do not have the training necessary to be able to integrate it into their classes. A considerable number of participants (60%) in the survey do not normally use computers to prepare their classes and its use in the classroom presupposes a prior use for preparation.

In this sense, and with respect to the interviews, it is very interesting the argument of a group of teachers who, while being in agreement in valuing very positively the potential of ICT for teaching English, claim that their use in the actual teaching situation and from the pedagogical point of view has not changed the form of traditional teaching. In effect they point out that the methodology continues to be the same.

4. Software

Despite the fact that the software available on the market at the present time does not adapt to their needs, very few teachers (24%) have elaborated or participated in the elaboration of their own software for use in the classroom and lack of training among teachers seems to be the principal cause.

The software which is most used is that provided by the different publishers and the most frequently used applications in Internet are Web pages and email, which implies that they do not use the Net to develop the communicative skills necessary for learning a foreign language.

LinEx operative system makes the use of software more difficult, as this system is incompatible in many cases with software for Windows, which is the operative system most used by the teachers.

5. Integration into the curriculum

Despite the fact that a considerably large group of teachers values in a very positive way the potential of ICT, according to the data from the questionnaires, more than half show a certain lack of interest or do not use the computer as a tool to help them cover the objectives set out in the syllabus.

It is claimed that the introduction of ICT has not modified the traditional methodology, nor has it implied real changes in educational practice from a pedagogical point of view. We have introduced a new element in our system, but exams, methodology, and objectives are the same. So, if we want ICT to be successful, we have to adapt the curriculum to a new way of teaching.

According to participants, among the impediments to completing the objectives of the English syllabus are the high number of students per class, the teachers' lack of skills in handling computers, the existing arrangement of computers in the classroom (none of the English teachers participating in this survey are in favour of the usual distribution of computers in the classroom, claiming that it is even anti-pedagogical). The lay out in two immovable rows means that teachers even have trouble seeing their students. And in a language class, working in groups and pairs, as well as interaction between teacher and pupil and visual contact is essential.

The incompatibility between the length of the class periods and the loss of time which the use of ICT implies, since lesson periods are fifty minutes, from which we have to discount the time which passes from when the teacher enters the classroom, switches on the computer and calls the register of the pupils. When working with computers the teacher has to switch on all those that are in the classroom, wait until each student has introduced a password, and check that each machine is working correctly. Teachers cannot be blamed for not using the computer with greater frequency.

Conclusions

The teachers of English in Extremadura have received no formal university training of any sort which includes ICT during their formation as teachers. None of the universities where the interviewees studied had included this subject matter in the training of future teachers of English and on top of that, the training courses on New Technologies offered do not adapt to the educational reality and are not considered practical. To this we must add that the teachers do not have the time necessary to put into practice the skills and knowledge acquired.

Our third conclusion is that there is a lack of pedagogical support for including ICT in their syllabus. Although all State Secondary Schools have the support of a computer technician, the Orientation Departments do not offer any help with the implementation of New Technologies and that teaching English via the ICT is completely different to the methodology known to the teachers. This contributes to a feeling of insecurity when they have to use them in the classroom since the tendency is always to repeat the same pattern with which they have learned, which is the one they master.

Where the classroom itself is concerned, class time is inadequate and according to the teachers, the organization of space when using computers is inappropriate.

We also conclude that the lack of flexibility of the present curriculum does not permit the adaptation and integration of New Technologies. A much more flexible curriculum is needed, as well as a revision of the present programmes.

And finally, that there is a lack of a specific space necessary for the teaching of languages, to develop communicative skills. A large number of the teachers insist on the need to create specific language classrooms, with loudspeakers, microphones and appropriate soundproofing.

References:
- Baigorri, A. y Muñoz, B. (2005). Análisis del Debate Educativo. Documento para la Reflexión y el Debate sobre la Educación en Extremadura (Educación Secundaria). Consejería de Educación. Junta de Extremadura. Mérida.
- Bax, S. (2003). CALL-past, present and future. *System 31*, 13-28.
- Bax, S. (2009). Rethinking Normalisation. In press
- Bidwell, C.E. (2001). Analyzing Schools as Organizations long-term permanence and short-term change. *Sociology of Education, 74, extra issue: Current of thought: Sociology of education at the dawn of the 21st century*, 100-114.
- Buckingham, D., Scanlon, M., Seftan-Green, J. (2001). Selling the digital dream. Marketing educational technology to teachers and parents. In A. Loveless & V. Ellis

(Eds.), *ICT, Pedagogy and the Curriculum. Subject to change.* New York : Routledge Falmer.

- Martínez, A., Correa, J. M. (2009). Can the grammar of schooling be changed? *Computers and Education, 53*, 51-56.

- McGinity, M. (2002). Reading behind the words: sociolinguistic aspects of attitude questionaires. *Sociolinguistics Symposium 14*. University of Gant.

- Ministerio de Industria, Turismo y Comercio. Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia. Centro Nacional de Educación y Comunicación Educativa. Red. es. Plan Avanza. (Curso 2005-2006). Las Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación en la Educación. Informe sobre la implantación y el uso de las TIC en los centros docentes de Educación Primaria y Secundaria.

- Somekh, B. (2004). Taking the Sociological Imagination to School: an analysis of the (lack of) impact of information and communication technologies on education systems. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education, vol.13 (2),* 163-179.

- Wager, W. (1992). Educational Technology: A broader vision. *Educational and Urban Society, 24 (4)*, 454-465.