

Making A 'Real' Difference

Richard Ford Whyte, ITE student (final year)

Living in the modern world means that we are now bombarded with information, news, and knowledge via a range of media that twenty years ago would have been the theme of a science fiction movie. This period of rapid transformation has led to new ways of communicating with each other. Electronic mail, digital photo texting and video conferencing, the list is fast becoming inexhaustible. Very seldom do young people write letters, why should they when an abbreviated text message is instant and less time consuming? It cannot be denied that this revolution in communication has had an impact on our everyday lives. This approach and attitude to giving and receiving information has led to the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within schools.

The Government, have through various strategies such as the National Grid for Learning and the New Opportunities Fund invested in this area of education. This investment by the government in the technical arena of Education was underpinned by the belief that computers will improve the learning, productivity, and performance in our schools. Has ICT a significant role to play in the education of children in schools? The advantages and disadvantages to both pupil and teacher alike will be critically analysed through researched literature, my observation of experienced teachers incorporating ICT into their teaching subject and my personal 'in class' use of ICT.

Overcoming my own fears

As a mature student, returning to full-time education after twenty-five years, the ICT expectation demanded of teachers frightened me. Having gone through High School in the late 1970s, I had left school with no knowledge whatsoever of computers. Although I had established and successfully run my own business for seventeen years I still had not needed the 'assistance' of computers. I had left that 'clever-stuff' to others! However, to progress on the Initial Teacher Education programme I had to successfully complete certain units of study in computer and ICT usage. This was perhaps one of the most difficult hurdles for me to overcome. Although the units were run as 'relaxed' workshops, younger (computer literate) students who clearly had no difficulty in working through the 'workpacks' surrounded me. A typical session was timetabled for two hours – of which I needed every minute, while my fellow students were leaving the room after thirty minutes, sometimes even less! This perpetual exodus merely fuelled my belief in my own incompetence with computers and Information Technology. Fortunately, my fears of incompetence, which might ultimately have led to my elimination from the ITE programme, were allayed with the indispensable support of the subject tutor and I can now assure anyone who is still in doubt that there is no need to be dissuaded by the use of ICT. My journey from total ignorance to 'competence' has been extremely satisfying not only to me but also to my pupils.

Possible barriers to implementation of ICT

In 1998 the government's New Opportunities Fund announced a £230m investment in ICT teacher training (Russell, 2001). Of this, £23m was allocated to Scotland. This programme was clearly a massive undertaking, which endeavoured to equip teachers with basic skills in the use of ICT. However, it appears that after an initial two or three-day ICT course no subsequent training was offered. Moreover, where trained teachers did not have a computer in the classroom or at home it meant they had little opportunity to practice further with the technology. This in turn may have

resulted in a lack of confidence and a reluctance to integrate ICT into lessons. Absence cover and limited non-contact periods further reduce in-school time to plan an ICT- integrated lesson.

Whilst the support staff arrangements agreed after the McCrone Report proposed additional support staff for ICT (Scottish Executive 2001:16) the shortage of computers or lack of 'whole class' connectivity to the network, appropriate modern multimedia and the shortage or lack of technical support may still result in ICT being under utilised.

There may also be a risk of ICT being delivered by specialists as a business rather than by teachers as an integral part of education, who as some have warned, may view learners as consumers of educational products (Kennewell *et al*, 2000:170).

ICT therefore, should not be viewed as an alternative to the class teacher but as an essential learning tool used co-operatively by the pupil and teacher to take the learning forward.

Benefits of ICT in language learning

Learning a foreign language often involves considerable repetition and learning of vocabulary. These aspects of learning can become tedious to the pupil. In turn a lack of interest and apathy erodes the motivation and thus the potential learning by the pupil.

Email

In order to engage pupils in 'everyday events' makes the learning of a new language real and worthwhile some schools have set up e-mail clubs with another school abroad. This brings the learning of the foreign language alive, makes the experience challenging and very real. As one pupil confirms: "With the club, we can talk to French people of our own age and we can relate better" (Imison and Taylor, 2001 p.92). The use of e-mail can also encourage development in reading and writing in the target language. Moreover, it creates an environment where pupils have to respond spontaneously using language and vocabulary that would otherwise have been used and forgotten. The exchange of cultural information from such an e-mail club is of immense value to both nationalities of pupils. Pupils have access to information and people of real interest and relevance to the pupil's own lives, thereby enhancing motivation (Modern Languages 5-14 National Guidelines, 2000).

Of course this method of enhancing a lesson requires investment. Equipment has to be suited to the task and a sufficient number of computers have to be available to facilitate, at least, small group or 'pair-work'. The risk factors too cannot be ignored when using the Internet as a communication tool. Pupil safety must be of paramount importance. The class teacher must ensure, in advance, the suitability of all web sites that are to be accessed. These considerations will significantly increase the workload and lesson preparation time demanded of the class teacher.

PowerPoint

ICT can have an impact not only on potential learning but also on individual teaching styles, other teachers and classroom management. During my SE2 placement, one particular lesson included a PowerPoint presentation to reinforce a previous lesson that dealt with a grammar issue. The pupils had described the previous lesson, where they had been 'drilled' in a grammar point, as "complicated" and "boring". By using humorous graphics and colour slides the pupils were

captivated. The slide show and my instruction were punctuated by pair work and pupil/teacher interaction. In this way the understanding of the grammar was successful and written exercises completed willingly and diligently. Not only was the learning taken forward but class discipline was not an issue as the interest of the pupils had been maintained. The regular class teacher benefited from a 'live' lesson that incorporated ICT and has since begun to use PowerPoint in some lessons.

Smartboard

Conventional teaching often requires the teacher to turn their back on the class when writing on the board, which provides 'an excuse' for pupils to chat to each other or move from their seat. This allows some pupils to become distracted and 'off-task'. The use of an interactive Smartboard and graphic tablets not only removes this opportunity for disruption but also increases pupil focus, as one teacher confirms:

I have seen my pupils from across the ability and age range respond to the ICT I use in the classroom. I have been able to transform the mundane vocabulary test into a fun, learning activity, and my pupils have benefited from this (Anonymous, 2004:17).

The advantage in this technology is that the pupils can interact with the Smartboard without leaving their seat. All the pupils see the projected image clearly and the graphic tablet(s), which operate using wireless technology, can be passed around the classroom, pupils can be invited to write their answers on the tablet. These responses are then transmitted and displayed on the Smartboard for whole class participation. Since the graphic tablets are portable there is no need for concern about a mouse or any cables. The set-up time for the portable Smartboard is however very time consuming with the routing of cables to be considered carefully. An in-situ Smartboard however, would overcome such Health and Safety issues.

Wordprocessing

Including ICT into a lesson does not necessarily have to involve the use of complex equipment. Simply using 'Word' packages, which will allow pupils to create a piece of writing over a period of time, can be of immense satisfaction to both teacher and pupil. Unlike handwritten work, tasks undertaken on a computer can be spell-checked and appropriate accents can be added or removed as necessary through the completion and correction of draft work. The pupil can therefore refer to the 'finished' piece as a 'model' of work completed correctly. The pupil's work is saved to a class or pupil file ready for the next stage. This method of progressive work in the target language can be used for formative and summative assessment.

The above example demonstrates how computers can depolarise the learning by a pupil from that of a passive state to an active condition. The latter being preferable as otherwise

it absolves the learner from any responsibility for their own learning and turns the school into a place of coercion (Imison & Taylor, 2001:48).

In this way ICT can be used to provide 'scaffolding' for pupils. By using computers, teachers can witness a shift from assisted learning to unassisted performance. In using Computers to create documents pupils will initially require differing degrees of assistance from the teacher. This is essentially due to the existing knowledge possessed by the pupil, as many children have access to a computer at home. As consolidation and extension of such knowledge is gleaned via the teacher, independent working by the pupil will begin to transpire.

Websites as teaching resources

In the teaching of Modern Languages, very often exercises are set for completion by pupils in an effort to reinforce understanding. Unfortunately, unless the teacher regularly corrects such work any formative assessment is left aside, to the detriment of the pupil's learning. ICT can be used, similarly to printed material, across the curriculum to create tasks that can be differentiated to suit the learning style and ability of the pupil. Teachers can create their own material or use appropriate web sites that include interactive tasks for pupils. In my own case, the use of such web sites has led to the pupils enjoying greater autonomy for their own learning. This strategy not only cuts down on photocopying and 'marking time' by the class teacher but also more importantly engages the pupils in the learning process. Furthermore, by using electronic interactive tasks, peer correction and self-correction can be fully exploited, and so the pupils benefit from repeated immediate feedback and correction.

'Class in a box'

Research has shown that different children learn in different ways, some are kinaesthetic and learn best by doing something, while others may benefit from an audio or visual input (Gardner, 1996). This means that if I as the teacher can adapt the task by adding an alternative sensory dimension, the task may become more accessible to a wider range of pupils, making the outcome more achievable. ICT can provide such differentiation, giving pupils more chance of encountering a task that stimulates their strengths (McColl, 2002).

For example, while using a compendium of laptops ('Class in a box'), I observed that pupils with special educational needs (SEN) such as dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and kinaesthetic learners benefited immensely from this 'hands-on' method of learning vocabulary and grammar. Not only did using interactive activities enhance the lesson but it also enriched the content of the work, giving an experience that is visual, audio and kinaesthetic. This created an environment where pupils could not only discuss the topics but also assist others in the 'navigation' of the web site and exercises while remaining 'on task'. In this respect, using ICT provided an alternative resource that 'tapped' into, perhaps otherwise unrecognised abilities.

The main disadvantage in using portable ICT equipment such as the 'Class in a box' is that of preparation time. Unless the equipment is resident in your own classroom, it has to be booked in advance, sourced and set up. I found that this entailed targeting a lesson where I had a non-contact period prior to the class, this meant that some year groups would not be logistically suited. In an effort to reduce the erosion of time, pupils were handed the equipment and asked to 'log-on' independently. This aspect of 'setting-up' was also time-consuming (only could only be shortened by having higher or faster specification equipment).

Similarly a suitable period of time had to be allowed to log-off, close down systems and pack equipment away before the end of the period! However, the concern with time was offset by the benefit of using the laptops to access web sites that reinforced and extended the pupil's knowledge of topics covered in a previous lesson.

Alternatively, as it is important for the class teacher to manage class time efficiently, access to a computer lab could be undertaken. In this way cross-school subject teachers could communicate by e-mail to establish availability of resources. Further, pupils and teachers will benefit from the appropriate use of resources, technology and time.

ICT - not a panacea

I believe that there is a danger of using ICT inappropriately and at an inappropriate time during the teaching of a unit of work. In the same way that a written piece of work can become 'blurred' by including too much information, text or the inappropriate use of differing fonts and images. The delivery of a lesson that incorporates ICT must not detract from the aim and objectives of a lesson. Care too must be taken not to over use ICT, as this could become tedious and uninspiring for the pupils. The use of ICT may also be inappropriate during summative assessments, when pupils should remain focused on the set test or exam and not become distracted by the inclusion of ICT. The teacher should not be seen as a facilitator of remote learning via computers. "It is the combination of successful teaching and the appropriate use of technology, which will make the difference to what happens in the classrooms" (Pentleton, 2001). Clearly a planned and appropriate balance between conventional teaching and ICT must be the goal of the teacher if pupils are to benefit from the successful integration of ICT.

In conclusion

From personal experience as a pupil, the purpose of learning a modern foreign language was much less valued compared with other subjects such as practical skills, English or mathematics. Today, foreign travel is often less expensive than holidays 'at home' and so some may consider that being able to communicate in a foreign language is only useful for holiday travel. Pupils are still by and large rather sceptical with regard to the *academic* value of learning a foreign language. Without having the opportunity to use such knowledge in 'real' situations, the learning often becomes benign, passive or is simply forgotten.

The use of ICT in the Modern Languages classroom has the potential to change perceptions on the value of learning a foreign language by bringing the language and culture closer to the pupil. Current technology gives pupils the opportunity to communicate directly with their foreign counterparts, establish friendships, exchange views and opinions relevant to their peer issues. ICT also has the potential to transform the way in which a foreign language is taught and learned. Modern Language teachers have become more dynamic. With the help of ICT, a plethora of material is immediately accessible via the Internet and CD-ROM's. ICT has equipped teachers with a 'toolbox' that can be used to motivate and stimulate a wider range of ability groups and SEN pupils than was previously possible without specialist support.

As a future Modern Languages teacher I feel that by integrating ICT into my own teaching subject I have challenged and promoted not only the learning of my pupils but also my own learning and methods of teaching. The integration of ICT and the professional development of teachers in its use can only enhance and enrich both the teaching and learning experience that takes place in the classroom. As teachers of Modern Languages, keeping pace with advancements in ICT technology is extremely important. Making such a conscious effort will ensure that today's pupils have a greater chance of integrating successfully into the modern multi-lingual society of tomorrow.

References

Anonymous (2004) 'Interactive Winner'. *TES 'Teacher' magazine* February 6. TLS Education Ltd.

Gardner, H. (1996) *Teaching for Effective Learning*. Scottish Consultative Council for the Curriculum.

Imison, T. and Taylor, P. (2001) *Managing ICT in the Secondary School*. Heinemann Educational Publishers.

Kennewell, S., Parkinson, J., Tanner, H. (2000) *Developing the ICT Capable School*. Routledge Falmer.

McColl, H. (2002) 'Modern Languages for all – or for the few?' *Scottish Languages Review* 5. www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/SLR/issue5/discussion-paper.htm

Pentleton, M. (2001) 'ICT: Making It (Virtually) Real' *Scottish Languages Review* 2. www.scilt.ac.uk/SLR/Issue2/discussion_paper.htm

Russell, T. (2001) *Teaching and Using ICT in Secondary Schools*. David Fulton Publishers Ltd.

Scottish Executive, (2000) *Modern Languages 5-14 National Guidelines*. Learning and Teaching Scotland.

Scottish Executive (2001) *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century: Agreement reached following recommendations made in the McCrone Report*. www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/tp21a.pdf