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THE COMPUTER AS A TEACHING TOOL

Similarly to tape recorders and overhead projectors, also computers can be extremely useful teaching tools. They have a motivating effect that few other devices or techniques have. As an information technology teacher I have often experienced students' enthusiasm for computer programs. They are highly motivated by tasks connected with computers. Scrimshaw declares that computers «have the potential to redefine the scope of the language curriculum» (1993: Abstract). It is without doubt that computers promote and facilitate highly effective and motivating new learning experiences. They provide the best tools to catch students' interest, and it is easier to develop language skills when students are active. If they have the opportunity to interact with the computer, their attention rarely drops.

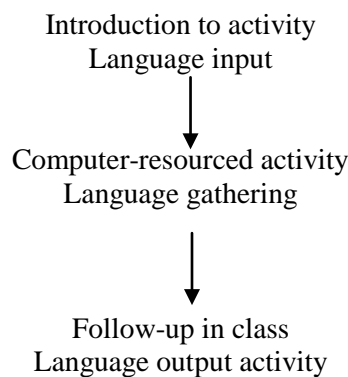
The additional advantage of computers to conventional classroom techniques is that tasks can be set according to the users' language ability. This is why computer-assisted instruction is considered to be learner-directed. Another important aspect is that students get immediate feedback from the computer, which allows them to evaluate their own answers while the questions are still fresh.

Used in the right place computers make language teaching very effective. The Internet, which is a relatively new area in education, is an impressive example for this, as it offers new possibilities for computer-assisted language teaching. Windeatt, Hardisty and Eastment call the Internet «a tool which has great potential

in the language classroom, but its effectiveness in practice depends to a large extent on the way it is exploited by teachers and students» (2000: 8).

It is evident that teachers face new challenges while using computers during the language lessons. Obviously, learning to use it effectively takes a lot of energy and time. Lessons have to be planned well ahead to avoid confusion. Instructions given to the students have to be also carefully constructed, at least until students get used to the program.

Although it is widely emphasized that computer lessons are motivating, many teachers who are still unconfident in operating computers are afraid of them. The other extreme is when the purpose of computers in the classroom is over-exaggerated. According to Michael Carrier, to make it rewarding computer use has to be closely linked to traditional activities in the classroom. He suggests that computer lessons need to be designed as a «methodological sandwich»:



Multimedia CDs that are becoming widespread in education offer outstanding materials that can be very well incorporated into conventional lessons. Above all, they give students access to electronic dictionaries, encyclopaedias and thesauruses. They are more up-to-date and easier to use than those in book form. Another effective tool is the Internet, where students can use on-line resources that provide them with an incredible amount of information. Computer-based teaching materials are constantly improved and developed to be more sophisticated and to make better use of the advantages of computers.