ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING COMPUTER NETWORK TECHNOLOGY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Computer technology has been used in language teaching since the 1980's. However, with the advent of Internet, the computer has been transformed from a tool for information processing and display to a tool for information processing and communication. The instant worldwide connections enabled by the Internet have changed the way teachers and learners work in their teaching and learning of second/foreign language. Indeed, the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web in second and foreign language instruction has been increasingly recognized. A number of applications of computer network technology have been utilized such as multimedia, email, electronic journals, databases, World Wide Web, chat, audio and video conferencing etc. This paper will investigate both advantages and disadvantages of incorporating such technology in language courses.

The computer network has offered language teachers and learners a source of authentic materials, tools for communication and collaboration and tools for improving language skills. First and foremost, the computer networked learning environment facilitates the language teaching and learning by providing teachers and learners with valuable sources of materials. Teachers can exploit multimedia to support their language teaching. Teachers also integrate authentic materials on numerous Websites such as http://www.geocities.com, http://owl.english.purdue.edu/ etc. into language lessons. With regard to learners, they are exposed to a wide range of resources such as online dictionaries, thesauri, machine translation software, which enables learners to learn vocabulary while reading. In addition, quite a few authentic language journals such as The Modern Language Journal, The Internet TESL Journal etc. are available on the net and databases. The use of the Internet can remove the greatest obstacle in the access to the authentic written word, which is the price. Indeed, not all language students, especially those in English as foreign language (EFL) contexts cannot afford to subscribe to any foreign newspaper. Therefore, electronic newspapers are a great chance for educators and learners because they are easily accessible and almost free. Besides, learners can obtain lecture notes and prepare for lessons beforehand or review the lessons from anywhere at any time suitable for them.

Secondly, computer network has been seen as a useful tool for communication. Advances in computer technology have created remarkable new ways to connect language learners. Asynchronous and synchronous communication enable

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language learners can communicate rapidly and inexpensively with other language learners or speakers of the target language around the world (Warschauer and Healy, 1998). From these kinds of communication, positive affective benefits for learners are reported in the foreign language classroom.

In fact, the advantage of computer-mediated communication (CMC) brought about by Internet is that learners are given an opportunity to interact with others without interruptions, time pressure or social anxiety. Moreover, the use of technology redistributes teacher and classmate attentions so that less able students can become more active participants in class.

The on-line environment also enhances communication between teachers and learners. Warchauter (1997) explored the use of email between a teacher and her students in a graduate of English as second language (ESL) writing class. He found that using email enables teacher to provide students with detailed and rapid feedback on the immediate problems and questions they had.

Computer- based communication technology also provides tools for language learners to improve their language skills. Learners are exposed to numerous software programs to improve their reading, listening, speaking skills and grammar knowledge . For example, students in the networked writing project by Beuvois (1998) display more fluidity of conversation, more use of complex sentences, and more self- disclosure. Lunde (1990) also showed that Japanese students enrolled in a computer mediated communication project showed improvement in reading comprehension. Besides, learners

can use audio- visual technologies to correct and/or enhance pronunciation of words in the target language.

The use of technology in foreign language learning also appears to influence the development of communicative skills. In fact, computers can offer foreign language learners more than drills; "they can be a medium of real communication in the target language, including composing and exchanging messages with other students in the classroom or around the world" (Oxford, 1990, p. 79). By involving in an email exchange with a native speaker, learners receive plenty of authentic target language input from their exchange partner while maintaining the unrehearsed communicative context.

The network environment also enables a new form of language learning i.e. distance learning. Indeed, the Web has created the capability of opening classroom doors to the world. Online environments and the use of the WWW provide students with skills such as online communication, discussion, problem analysis, problem solving, critical thinking and negotiation of meaning. Distance learning is especially of benefits in language learning because not everyone can afford to study abroad and explore the language cultures. In contrast, with the application of the Internet and the WWW, students can attend foreign language classes from home without having to go to the country where the target language is spoken. One of the main reasons for special interest of foreign language educators in distance learning is that technology makes it possible to bring the target culture into the classroom and thus, closer to students.

Language learning is a multifaceted social and cultural phenomenon; therefore, one of the most essential pedagogical principles of language teaching is one that emphasizes the study of language in a cultural context because language and culture are inextricable and independent. Sanaouri and Lapkin (1992) found that in an email exchange project between these students and native French speakers, students assumed increased responsibility for their learning and broaden their cultural knowledge. Indeed, virtual trips enabled by the Internet offer students an opportunity to visit countries and learn about the people, language, and culture. Undoubtedly, understanding the culture of the target language enhances the understanding of the language.

However, the discussion would be incomplete without addressing the disadvantages or obstacles related to the issue of using computer network technology in language teaching and learning in terms of financial barriers, content considerations, technical features and pedagogical perspectives.

The most challenge is the issue of access. Students must have computer and Internet access. Therefore, they will meet with difficulties when technology is not always as reliable as it should be and Internet access is not always available. This situation is commonplace in quite a few English as foreign language (EFL) contexts. Financial barriers include the cost of setting up a network in the school, which can be expensive.

Financial barriers also include the investment in training. The use of the Internet in language teaching and learning requires some technological knowledge and computer skills from both teachers and learners. Insufficient computer skills from students have affected the quality of online collaboration of Lee (2004)'s project. Teachers may be reluctant to use technology in classroom because many of them have not been trained to use technology. Others do not understand how to use the new technologies. This requires school investments for training in this area, which is beyond the current capacity for schools in EFL contexts.

Moreover, searching for materials on-line can be sometimes time- consuming and frustrating. Many learners find it difficult to read papers on a computer screen. Also, it is easy to become bombarded with too much information with little control over the quality and accuracy the contents. Therefore, a certain technical expertise is required from both teachers and students. More importantly, little is know about how to make use of Internet- based materials or how to design tasks that allow the learners to explore these materials and yield expected learning outcomes.

There are still limitations on navigation and hyperlink structures in the networked learning environment, which can make learners get lost. Besides, communication on the Web will be difficult when the network is slow at peak times. Findings from two pilot studies by Kotter (2001) which investigated the use of Internet- based audio conferencing and email by distance language learners at the British Open University show that about one fifth of students dropped out because of technical problems in terms of the speed of the network and the reliability of the software.

Another challenge to the use and implementation of computer- assisted language learning (CALL) in the foreign language classroom is the pedagogical changes. The use of networked computing environment in second or foreign language learning will lead to the different ways of teaching and learning from the traditional language classrooms. In fact, the nature of the space of the language learning environment has undergone a paradigm shift- from traditional blackboard classrooms to computer labs- and so the position as teachers/learners within that space has changed also. In this environment, teacher's role underwent a significant shift from a knowledge giver to a facilitator. The students took over the responsibility for their own language learning and became more active and more autonomous learners.

The changes in pedagogy, teachers' and learners' roles have implied the difficulties of the network environment in EFL contexts. For instance, Conrad (1999) finds that first semester students in regular foreign language classes favored repetition and structured activities over more creative linguistic activities through the Internet. In most of EFL traditional classrooms, students are accustomed to the traditional language teaching style, which is dominated by a teacher- centered, book- centered and an emphasis on rote memory. Therefore, the application of new teaching methodologies that are more learner- centered requires the re-evaluation of the role of the FL teachers and learners in a CALL environment.

Despite these obstacles, what has been offered by the computer network technology is far too beneficial to be ignored. There is no doubt that the computer network technology e.g. the Internet and the WWW offers teachers and learners vast amount of materials and communication possibilities to enhance their language teaching and learning. For the successful integration of the networked environment in language courses, both teachers and learners need to be prepared to adopt new roles and use the available technology in appropriate ways. Teachers should be prepared with professional skills which include pedagogical and technical skill because the more enthusiastic and more knowledgeable language teachers are, the more successfully they can implement Internet in the language classroom. Learners can only benefit from technology – based activities provided that these activities are relevant to their needs and interest. In short, the decision whether and how to use Web- based materials, must be based on a clear pedagogical rationale, while technological and developmental issues need to be carefully considered.

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THUẬN LỢI VÀ KHÓ KHĂN TRONG VIỆC ỨNG DỤNG HỆ THỐNG MÁY TÍNH NỐI MẠNG TRONG VIỆC DẠY NGOẠI NGỮ

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Công nghệ thông tin đã được áp dụng trong việc giảng dạy ngoại ngữ từ những năm 1980. Tuy nhiên với sự ra đời của Internet, máy tính không chỉ là phương tiện xử lý dữ liệu thông tin mà còn là phương tiện trao đổi thông tin. Thật vậy, Internet đã góp phần thay đổi cách thức giảng dạy và học tập ngoại ngữ truyền thống của giáo viên và sinh viên. Trên thực tế, công nghệ thông tin đã cung cấp cho giáo viên và học sinh nguồn tài liệu vô tận cho việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ. Ngoài ra, hệ thống máy tính nối mạng và đặc biệt là các hộp thư điện tử đã góp phần tạo điều kiện thuận lợi cho việc thông tin liên lạc giữa giáo viên và sinh viên, giữa các sinh viên với nhau. Công nghệ thông tin còn cung cấp công cụ cho người học để rèn luyện các kỹ năng ngôn ngữ. Tuy nhiên, việc ứng dụng thông tin trong việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ cũng gặp phải không ít khó khăn đặc biệt ở những nước sử dụng tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ. Những khó khăn này là do hạn chế về tài chính, những vấn đề về kỹ thuật, về nội dung tài liệu và về phương pháp giảng dạy ở những nước này. Để khai thác có hiệu quả công nghệ thông tin trong việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ thì cần xem xét kỹ lưỡng các vấn đề về công nghệ, nâng cao kỹ năng cần thiết cho giáo viên và học sinh cũng như những vấn đề về sư phạm.