



Article Title

The Contribution of Multimedia Tools to EFL Settings Unfamiliar with Technology

Author

Vu Thi Phuong Thao

Hanoi University of Foreign Studies, Vietnam

Abstract

In response to an appeal from Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training to all universities and colleges to improve the quality of tertiary education toward regional and international standards, language institutions are making great efforts to further promote the foreign language learning process. In the last few years, there have been dramatic changes in the ways that languages are taught with the replacement of grammar translation by communicative approaches and the introduction of technological tools. The reason for such changes is that the goal of Vietnamese learners is no longer to pass examinations but to use language for daily communications and interactions.

In many universities, the success of students' acquisition is now measured in term of their ability to communicate in the second language rather than on examining their accuracy in using certain grammatical features. Therefore, apart from experimenting new teaching methods, more and more universities have been applying modern technology to support language skills teaching and linguistic studies with a view to fostering better achievements. Among those, Hanoi University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) is the pioneer to explore the benefits of multimedia tools to assist language skills teaching. The tools include a network of computers and related software, VCRs, cassette players, and slide projectors linked together.

Although multimedia have enthusiastically been praised by many experts and academicians, the contribution of multimedia in supporting language learning at HUFS is not obvious due to the limitations and restrictions of learning styles, teaching approaches, and computer skills in Vietnam. Therefore, this paper explores the role of multimedia as effective tools at Vietnamese universities where they are unfamiliar to teachers and students, and suggests recommendations for teachers' adjustment, more active participation of students and adequate computer skills.

Hanoi University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) is seeking further improvements and achievements in teaching language skills and linguistic studies. Apart from selecting qualified teaching staff, finding appropriate teaching methods, the university is experimenting with the use of technological tools to support language teaching-learning process. Therefore, in addition to five modern language labs sponsored by governments and educational organizations of the US, Belgium, Italy and Portugal, the university has now been equipped two newest multimedia labs in which thirteen students can occupy their own carrels with computers and headsets. The distinction between a normal language lab and a multimedia lab is that the former provides audio equipment through which learners can listen to the tapes, record their voices and communicate with the teacher, whilst the latter operates as a multifunction tool through which students can either listen to the tapes, watch videos and different TV channels, access Internet or communicate with one another while the teacher can operate technical equipment to group or to pair students and hold discussions within the class. "Such video cameras and computers assist teachers in their jobs, bringing the outside world into the classroom, and, in short, making the task of language learning a more meaningful and exciting one" (Brinton, 2001, p. 460).

With these advantageous functions, the multimedia lab is suitable for ESL/ EFL teaching using communicative approaches. In fact, teachers around the world are experimenting with these tools and using them to motivate learners and to enhance their language lessons (Stempleski & Arcario, n. d.). Brinton (2001) further emphasizes "Whatever the approach, language teachers seem to agree that media can and do enhance language teaching" (p.

459). I am among those teachers and, as an EFL teacher at the English Department of HUFS, I have been assigned to teach listening and speaking skills for first-year and second-year students of pre-intermediate and intermediate levels in the multimedia lab, which contains a network of 30 computers, all hooked to a server at the front of the room. Each computer has a monitor and headphones and is installed with the Tandberg TLC-3000 program, which allows the teacher to play cassette tapes, video tapes, CDs, DVDs, Internet programs or media files from the front of the room, and the students to view and hear what the teacher plays. The teacher can also view, hear, monitor students' work, and communicate with students through a microphone on the headset or through class speakers. In addition, some main functions of the program as Phone Conversation, Pair Discussion, and Group Conference help teacher pair or group students to hold discussions. When the teacher is not running the program the students can use their individual computers to run programs for pronunciation practice or other skill practice.

The teaching materials for each level are:

- Pre-intermediate Headway Video (Falla, 1994): the materials, which include video cassettes and activity book, provide the everyday English conversations and mini-documentaries accompanying exercises of gap filling, answering questions, selecting information, etc. to develop students' listening comprehension skills.
- The ABC News Intermediate ESL Video Library: this is an interactive, integrated skills series of four videocassettes: Business Watch (Maurice, 1994), Culture Watch (Tomalin, 1994), Earth Watch (Stempleski, 1994) and Health Watch (Arcario, 1994), are each accompanied by a student book. Each videocassette contains 12 actual broadcast segments from ABC News programs such as World News Tonight, 20/20, The Health Show, and Business World, focusing on high-interest topics spoken by a variety of people from diverse backgrounds and age groups. The student book offers task-based activities centering on the selected video segments. These activities provide practice in all four language skills.

The first lesson in the multimedia lab was quite a challenging task for my students and me

as we were not used to modern technical equipment and did not know how to operate it effectively. Although we gradually became familiar with the technology, it seemed to me that the effectiveness of this type of teaching was not completely parallel to how experts and educationalists praised it. Reflecting on my own teaching experience and other teachers' opinions, I observed such problems in using a multimedia lab, such as students playing computer games, listening to music programs, watching TV, chatting with fellow students or keeping silent during the lesson. These problems encountered in my teaching led me to my area of inquiry: Is the contribution of multimedia labs in motivating language learning in Vietnam similar to what has been predicted in other regions? If not, why not?

Literature review

Since the early 1960s, language teachers have witnessed dramatic changes in the ways that languages are taught. The focus of instruction has broadened from the teaching of discrete grammatical structures to the fostering of communicative ability (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Together with the appearance of communicative approaches, the emergence of multimedia tools in language teaching has attracted the attention of teachers, academicians, educationalists and experts. From the opinions of those who have studied the role and function of the tools, it seems to be rather controversial and unlikely to produce a definite answer to the apparently simple question, "Do multimedia tools actually enhance and promote foreign language learning?"

Brinton (2001) supposed that multimedia tools serve as an important motivator in the language teaching process because "media materials can lend authenticity to the classroom situation, reinforcing for students the direct relation between the language classroom and the outside world" (p. 461). Hartnett (as cited in Brinton, 2001) shared that perspective by saying that media tools appeal to students' senses and help them process information, thus empowering their understanding of the target culture and increasing their motivation toward language learning, reinforcing the teaching points, and saving the teacher unnecessary explanation. Similar findings have been made public by Warschauer (1996), Lee (1997), Bush (1997), Beauvois (1998), and Meunier (1998) (as cited in Brauer, 2001).

The rationales of these researchers stem from the awareness that the emphasis in foreign language learning has moved from a traditional approach - one that focuses on the study of the language itself - to a communicative approach in which learners acquire both linguistic and cultural competence. The application of multimedia tools can foster this goal by creating "a learning environment wherein students practice their language skills and acquire target culture" (Brauer, 2001, p.130). Mollica (as cited in Brinton, 2001) also suggested that media provide teachers with a means of presenting material in a time-efficient and compact manner, and of stimulating students' senses, thereby helping them to process information more readily. In other words, such media as audio and video equipment, computers and related software and Internet sources have been seen as effective tools to develop students' language competence so that they can interact with native speakers comfortably and successfully in real-life situations. Some other studies showed the use of media has helped involve students more integrally in the learning process and to facilitate language learning by making it a more authentic, meaningful process (Nunan, 1999; Sperling, 1996; Warschauer, 1995 (as cited in Brinton, 2001)).

Stempleski, explored videos as a tool of foreign language learning: In addition to being a flexible vehicle for comprehension practice or for the presentation of new language, video, particularly in its authentic forms, effectively stimulates language production, especially with intermediate- and advanced-level students. Using video as a stimulus for classroom communication usually involves student interaction in pairs and groups and manipulation of the television technology to create an information gap that the learners must fill... Video technology offers the obvious advantages of stop/start, rewind/replay, sound on/off, and freeze-frame controls. These facilities make it possible for the teacher to present different sections of the video once or several times in different ways. For example, a teacher may decide to turn the sound control off and show only the video pictures to the students, '... preview video sequences, select viewing activities, and adapt the language exercises to fit their students' needs and different classroom situations.' (pp. 8, 12-13)

A parallel view was taken in the evaluation of video teaching by Schrum & Glisan (2000),

stating that video provides the context for a wide variety of communicative and interactive activities in the classroom. Exercises such as class surveys, problem resolution, video title and ending discussions, brainstorming, video summaries, information-gap exercises are just some examples. On the contrary, Froehlich (1999) has argued strongly against the contribution of multimedia tools, emphasizing that:

While anecdotal evidence suggests that the use of multimedia in foreign language learning and teaching has contributed somewhat to a general improvement of student attitude toward foreign language study (something stressed in particular by salespeople of laboratory equipment and software materials), there is no compelling evidence that the use of video programs, laser discs, CDs or computer technologies has led, holistically or in part, to an improvement in the acquisition and retention, grammatical accuracy, listening comprehension, or whatever. It seems, therefore, that we have not progressed since the days of the audio-only laboratory; we merely seem to have diversified the means, from one medium to multimedia, but the end result is as inconclusive and unimpressive as before. (p.151)

Although no technology is value-free, the use of multimedia tools in the classroom presents some challenges for teachers. Herrell (2000) thought that teachers who were not familiar with the tools might turn their lessons from a success to a failure as they failed to use the tools to support the lessons. "In fact, a teacher without experience in this approach is sometimes overwhelmed with both the possibilities and the potential barriers" (Herrell, 2000, p.134). In addition, Brinton (2001) claimed that the preparation of teacher-made media materials demands an investment of time and energy beyond that of normal lesson planning. As a result, quite a large number of language teachers express their inability or unwillingness to use multimedia in their classrooms. Briton (2001) classified them into the following groups:

Type 1: I'm all thumbs. I can't use media.

Type 2: My school district has no budget for media.

Type 3: I have no time to prepare media materials of my own.

Type 4: The syllabus I teach from is too tightly structured to allow for materials to be brought into the classroom.

Type 5: I teach advanced levels (alternatively, a given skill area such as composition or reading) and therefore don't need to use media. (p. 460)

These different types of teachers are not willing to use media tools to support their language teaching because the tools require a great time and energy to prepare. Apart from teachers, the relevance of media programs is another problem. According to Thomas, Brodkey & Passentino (as cited in Stempleski & Arcario, n. d.), a substantial number of English teachers do not use ELT media because they cannot easily access such media materials and are not able to interpret the resources both culturally and linguistically. Furthermore, Passentino (n. d.) discovered from a survey that up to now, no minimum technical requirement has been set for inclusion of particular ELT media.

Finally, the literature leads us to the understanding, which was also asserted by Wright (as cited in Briton, 2001) that "language teaching is a collective title for a variety of activities undertaken by different people in different circumstances. There is consequently no single medium ideal for language teaching as is often claimed" (p. 473). Ultimately, the success or failure of language learning/ teaching using multimedia tools can hardly be decided by the media themselves, but by other determinants like teachers' creativity and adaptability, students' language ability, the curriculum and the teaching goals as well.

Method

The aim of the study is to explore how students and teachers view their multimedia learning/ teaching experience with a view to deciding whether multimedia may have a valid place in language teaching at Hanoi University of Foreign Studies (HUFS). Data for the study were collected over a two-week period, consisting of quantitative information obtained from questionnaire surveys of multimedia lab (MML) use amongst learners and teachers of the English Department and qualitative information gathered from a series of interviews with teachers and others concerned. Initially, a survey (see Appendix A) was conducted over two weeks among 210 first-year and second-year language students of two

different levels: pre-intermediate and intermediate, who had already learned listening and speaking skills in multimedia labs. Those students were asked to fill in questionnaires in order to detect a range of learners' attitudes toward the use of multimedia. All designed questions focused on the investigation of students' general confidence about computers, then their feelings about the media and their use of them. At the same time, there was an additional survey (see Appendix B) of the English Department teachers on opinions of using multimedia for teaching listening and speaking skills regardless of whether they have MML teaching experience. Its focus was on learning objectives, learning skills and strategies as well as the teachers' attitude and their adjustment in teaching method and style. Following these two-week surveys were oral interviews (see Appendix C) with teachers, administrators, technicians and multimedia teaching observers.

Findings

Surveys and interviews of EFL teachers and learners regarding technology in their work as well as my reflection of teaching experience in MML have yielded a number of significant findings in the following areas: learners and teachers' expectations towards multimedia tools; computer skills and technical problems; learners and teachers' evaluation of MML use in teaching listening skills; teachers' role and students' progress.

Learners and teachers' expectations towards multimedia tools

All 210 students and 45 out of 50 teachers in the survey expected multimedia to be the most exciting and effective of teaching tools. One hundred percent of the teachers who had no media experience were willing to take the task of teaching language skills in MML and a large number of students considered computers perfect tools although only twenty percent of them had used computers. The majority of teachers and students believed that if they used multimedia tools, they would achieve an upward leveling effect, improve students' language proficiency and make the acquisition process easier, quicker and more interesting. These expectations may have originated from the fact that we are now living in an age of visual effects. Froehlich (1999) affirms the positive effects of visuals to people, which is also true of Vietnam culture:

Most people prefer and respond more favorably to visual stimuli than to sound only 'Learning today takes place less and less reading a text or listening to an audio-tape, modes of learning that require patience, concentration and the ability to internalize information and to transform it into knowledge. Instead, the learning process today is characterized by being informed and entertained simultaneously through a combination of complementary, easily absorbable signals to our senses... Foreign language education nowadays has to be fun.' (pp. 150-151)

Computer skill and technical problems

The study revealed surprisingly widespread unfamiliarity with computers among both learners and teachers. About seventy percent of students did not feel confident in working with computers and needed technical assistance during the lesson. The reason they claimed was that they received too little computer training before their course. Most students came from provinces where they had had no chance to learn computer skills. Although the university provided computer skills courses for both teachers and students, they were often at the end of the term. Therefore, some students said that they had never touched a computer before they entered the lab. In one class, a student asked her teacher what the mouse was used for and wiped it against the screen to start her computer. In another class, a student held the mouse in front of the screen and clicked it as the remote control of TV. Only thirty percent of students who possessed proper computer skills could solve some simple technical problems, but they were more familiar with computerized entertainment than computerized education.

One third of these students admitted that they often played games during class, the others did so sometimes since they could hardly resist the temptation of available games or music shows when some of the lessons, as they described, were long, boring and irrelevant. In addition, most students agreed that technical problems happened too often and up to seventy percent felt frustrated when being interrupted during the lesson. Some students expected computers to be perfect tools; therefore, they were even more frustrated than

usual when they were disappointed. The restrictions also appeared on the side of the teachers. Like the students, the teachers all claimed that they needed to be trained much more in computer skills in order to deal with technical problems.

Only twenty percent of those felt confident in operating equipment and had ability to tackle some common problems. One teacher told me that her experience in MML was a nightmare as nearly half of the computers had problems now and then in her lesson, and she had to float amongst rows to help her students with technical issues, some of which she could not solve either. This interrupted the lesson and consumed much time of both students and the teacher. She added that when she transferred a video sequence into her student's computers, and asked them to practice themselves, only a few of them knew how to turn it on.

Learners and teachers' evaluation

109 out of the 210 student questionnaire respondents were satisfied with their learning in MML and claimed that they loved watching pictures, working with computers, headsets and microphones. The others said that their learning in MML did not come up to their expectations, and judged the work in MML as time-consuming. They cited a number of reasons for this. First, computer breakdowns happened so often that they distracted the students' attention to the lesson. Second, the lessons were too difficult for up to twenty percent of the students and some topics were unfamiliar to Vietnam culture. Third, fifty-four percent student respondents admitted that they could hardly get involved in the activities in MML as they had learned English at high school in a different way.

The survey showed that up to sixty-one percent of the teachers had never taught in MML although they were eager to for two different reasons. Half of them were curious and wanted to challenge themselves with a new task while the other half saw the value of MML over audio tools they were using. On the other hand, those who already worked in MML did not seem to be confident in giving proper instructions, designing activities and solving problems occurring during the lessons. A majority of teachers admitted that they could

hardly manage the class and monitor student's jobs. One teacher revealed she could not know whether her students were watching the video or playing games because students could easily minimize the game or music shows they were playing or watching, and hide the program bar whenever the teacher came.

Teacher's role and learner's progress

A Multimedia class is more teacher-fronted than a student-centered as the teacher plays a crucial role in the class. Almost every teacher exploited such functions of video teaching as to replay sequences (of videos), use pause/ still frame, interrupt viewing to check comprehension, cut off sound to focus on image, replace soundtrack with own narration or ask students to narrate, select certain sequences for intensive viewing, pass over others, and to assign certain sequences for out of class viewing. However, several teachers just switched on the video and left it alone because they were not sure how to use it. Quite a large number of teachers did not know how to operate the equipment to group or to pair students; therefore, they could not create follow-up activities after students' viewing time. In addition, the organization of computer clusters in rows prevented students from communicating and helping each other effectively when the teacher didn't know the "phone call" function of the equipment or couldn't group or pair them up; Thus, preparation of role plays or discussions was difficult. The majority of teachers said that class management is the most challenging task as they could hardly check whether students were working or playing games. Moreover, teachers could not spend time with individual students because they were busy handling problems with equipment most of the time.

Learner's progress

Learner assessment included self-evaluations of the students, the assessment of teachers and students' grades at the final exam. Twenty percent of student respondents claimed that they were not motivated and made little progress in listening comprehension and proficiency. Eighty percent felt that they made little and slow progress, which was under their expectations. Teachers also said that their students seemed to gain no remarkable

advances in listening. At final exams, around thirty percent of video-study students got higher grades than audio students did. The rest got the same or even lower marks. This result is not difficult to explain. Apart from inadequate technical ability, a majority of students made little improvement because of their learning habits. In traditional classes, students were used to focusing on listening to audio-tapes only.

Therefore, when working on the computer, many did not look at the screen so that watching would not distract them from listening. The unique advantage of video in offering topics, showing settings and social roles (such as age, sex, status) along with the attitude and moods of the participants in communicative situations became worthless with those students. They even had more difficulty in understanding video sequence when the visual effects, which they refused to watch, played a more important role in comprehension process. Although some writers have claimed "students who view videos demonstrate greater listening comprehension than do students who do not view them" (Schrum & Glisan, 2000, p. 323), my findings did not show a similar fact since up to twenty percent of students just focused on listening and ignored the visual aids and did not look at the screen.

Conclusion

There is no denying that technological development can critically affect our behavior and expectations. Regarding multimedia in teaching language, the advantages of authenticity, interactivity, various accessible resources, and combinations of pictures, sound and text are obvious. Nevertheless, in many cases language teachers and learners have not yet maximized their benefit for two main reasons. First, teachers and students lacked adequate computer skills and familiarity with the tools, which slowed down and obstructed the learning process. Second, the current teaching and learning styles of trainers and learners also prevented the learning process from flowing. At HUFS, the procedures of multimedia learning were similar to audio learning. Thus, it is crucial to identify now the roles of teachers and learners in MML.

The teacher in the lab should be the facilitator who provides significant guidance in the

students' use of computer programs, supports weaker students, and works closely with all students in order to guide them, advising them in the use of supplementary tools such as dictionaries and other reference works apart from the content of the lesson. To become good facilitators, teachers must adjust their teaching styles to a new learning environment and acquire a certain level of computer skills. At the same time, learners need to change their attitudes toward multimedia language learning, becoming more active, independent and responsible for their own learning as well as achieving adequate computer skills.

In short, teachers and students are responsible for the success or failure of multimedia tools in supporting language learning. These modern tools may help us to fulfill our tasks effectively, and "create a new dimension for language learning and teaching as well as an additional literacy" (Schrum & Glisan, 2000, p. 325) only when teachers and students are in the right position to exploit them. Therefore, teachers should consider the following factors when using multimedia tools in order to fulfill their teaching goals: the type of skills be presented; student and teacher preferences and teaching styles; the availability of software and hardware; the physical circumstances of the classroom lab; and the type of video materials.

Although some teachers suggested that TV/VCRs installed in classrooms might be cheaper, simpler tools for both teachers and students in learning language with visual effects and no complicated technical skills, I think based upon the aforementioned research that all teachers should maximize their efforts to work in the MML. To carry out their teaching task successfully, language teachers need adequate computer skills training as well as the access to the communicative teaching approaches instead of traditional approaches.

References

- Arcario, P. (1994). Health watch. [Videocassette]. America: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Brauer, G. (2001). Pedagogy of language learning in higher education: An introduction. Ablex Publishing, Westport, Connecticut.
- Brinton, D. M. (2001). The use of media in language teaching. In Celce-Murcia, M. (Ed.), Teaching English as a second or foreign language (pp. 459-475). Boston, MA: Heinle and

Heinle.

Falla, T. (1994). *Headway video: Pre-intermediate*. [Videocassette]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Froehlich, J. (1999). *Language lab - Multimedialab - Future lab*. In Hogan-Brun, G. & Jung, U. O. H. (Ed.), *Media, multimedia omnimedia* (pp. 149-155). Peter Language publishers, Frankfurt.

Herrell, A. L. (2000). *Fifty strategies for teaching English language learners*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Merrill.

Maurice, K. (1994). *Business watch*. [Videocassette]. America: Prentice Hall Regents.

Schrum, J. L. & Glisan, E. W. (2000). *Teacher's handbook: Contextualized language instruction*. (2nd ed.) Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.

Stempleski, S. (1994). *Earth watch*. [Videocassette]. America: Prentice Hall Regents.

Stempleski, S. & Arcario, P. (n. d.). *Video in second language teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to speakers of other language, Inc.

Tomalin, B. (1994). *Culture watch*. [Videocassette]. America: Prentice Hall Regents.

Warschauer, M. & Kern, R. (2000). *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press