



7th International Conference on Intercultural Education “Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World”, EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

ICT in the English classroom. Qualitative analysis of the attitudes of teachers of English towards its implementation in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The government of Extremadura proposed the introduction of a computer for every two pupils in state secondary schools since 2000. With the project Escuela 2.0, the aim of the Ministry of Education in Extremadura is providing each class with a digital blackboard and each student with a lap top computer from their first to their last year at secondary schools. Given the enormous cost of this programme, it is imperative that schools make the best use of ICT. Our study therefore, was designed to find out whether this was so and if not why not. We chose as subjects of the study English language teachers in the province of Badajoz, based on the hypothesis that any problems which might arise with the implantation of the plan would be found principally in the negative attitudes of teachers involved. This work aims at establishing the reasons for the failure to normalize the use of computers in the English language classroom analyzing in depth the data proceeding from the interviews carried out among sixteen teachers of English from public and private Secondary Schools.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; ICT; Teachers' attitudes; Secondary Education

1. Introduction

The difficulty of providing quality education in Extremadura, an area whose widely dispersed population in small rural groups forms an educational subsystem with specific peculiarities, is especially serious in the case of speciality

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subjects like English. It is, on the other hand, the first local government in Spain to design a wide scale technological literacy project.

The literature on attitudes is abundant in sociolinguistics but scarcer in the specific area of teachers' attitudes towards learning and teaching. In recent years, however, there have been an ever increasing number of studies into the possible reasons for the lack of impact of ICT in improving educational results (Somekh, 2004), the different aspects which could be influential such as self-efficiency of teacher's own computer skills (Paraskeva, Bouta & Papagianni, 2008) or the part emotions play in accepting computers (Veen & Slegers, 2006) as well as numerous studies on the problems facing the introduction and use of computers in the classroom especially from the point of view of differing expectations and attitudes between students and teachers (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Finally several studies have emerged which establish teachers attitudes as the probable basic cause of the wide distance between expectations and results. (Todman & Dick, 1993; Gobbo & Girardi, 2001; Albirini, 2006; Hermans et al, 2008; Shoffner, 2009; Galván 2010 & 2011). In this sense, Ertmer (2005, p.27) quotes Marcinkiewicz (1993, p.234) when he noted that the "full integration of computers into the educational system is a distant goal unless there is reconciliation between teachers and computers. To understand how to achieve integration, we need to study teachers and what makes them use computers".

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.

Bax (2011) 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 a real 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. For these reasons, we wonder if the priority of the Ministry of Education in Extremadura should be investing on teachers' training for the introduction of ICT in education, instead on providing all students with a computer. 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.

2. Objectives

Bax (2003) defines normalization as the "*stage when the technology becomes invisible, taken for granted in everyday life, embedded in everyday practice and hence "normalised" to the extent that we hardly even recognise them as Technologies*" (p.23)

This study aims at establishing the reasons for the failure to normalize the use of computers, specifically in the English language classroom. The subjects of the study are English language teachers in the province of Badajoz, based on the hypothesis that any problems which might arise with the implementation of ICT would be found principally in the attitudes of teachers involved.

3. Methodology

Our research 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. All the interviews were recorded with a digital recorder at different schools and later transcribed for their analysis.

In order to respect the anonymity and confidentiality of the interviewees, we will refer to them in our quotes as PCP (Profesor de Centro Público / State school teacher) or PCC (Profesor de Centro Concertado / Private school teacher).

The topics centered on the integration of ICT 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.

4. Considerations with respect to the interviews

The largest group of our research is made up of teachers in the 30-40 age group, with their own permanent teaching post and a wide experience of teaching languages.

The majority of teachers who have participated in this study consider that despite the fact that the use of ICT in the classroom has facilitated the rapid access to a large variety of resources, this has not meant a revolution in education. Among the reasons which have restrained this revolution, they claim the low academic level of students, the elevated number of students per class, the deficient functioning of the computers and Internet, the loss of time which supposes their use and finally the lack of training of the teachers:

Eso implica mayores conocimientos técnicos que no tenemos, y ese ha sido el problema. Te han metido los ordenadores, no puedes mover las mesas, y tú no estás preparado para utilizar eso que tienes ahí. Entonces, en algunos casos, se produce rechazo a las Nuevas Tecnologías (PCP 11)

On the other hand, all of the teachers agree that the said revolution has occurred at the administrative level, in management, control of absences and communication with parents. The same number of teachers believes that the way the ICT has been introduced into the centers of Secondary Education in the province of Badajoz has not been the most adequate. They believe that it would have been much better to invest the money spent on buying computers in other resources such as the training of teachers.

We find very interesting the arguments of a group of teachers who, while being in agreement in valuing very positively the potential of ICT, 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. In this sense, Richards (2006), reached the conclusion that one of the reasons why it is so complicated for teachers to integrate ICT in their actual teaching, is that the starting point is the assumption that technology is “something you add on to existing ‘pedagogy’ and vice versa” (Richards, 2006, p. 240). 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, p.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 the Report on the Impact of ICT in European centers of education (Balanskat et al, 2006). Martínez & Correa (2009) basing their arguments, among others, on said report, claim that the norms and the rigid structure which dominate the system, among which they highlight the timetable, examinations, the clear division into subjects or the criteria used for the different materials imparted, prevent the integration of ICT in teaching and block the possibilities of success in their implementation. The different levels of education, from Primary Education, Secondary and even University Studies have norms and principles which are shared by all the members of this group, although unconsciously. Martínez & Correa (2009) compare the incapacity of a speaker to explain the grammatical rules which define the use of his or her language but who know how to distinguish between correct and incorrect utterances, with the teacher who knows how to distinguish between, “practices that they deeply believe are conducive to proper learning and practices that they believe are not. In both cases they are unaware of the criteria underlying the distinction” (Martínez & Correa, 2009, p.52)

Where students are concerned, although ICT help the teachers resolve certain discipline problems in the classroom, because they awaken interest in the students and motivate them, they also contribute to the fact that it becomes more complicated to make the student concentrate on the activities to be carried out in the English class, given that the usual tendency is for them to use the computer to play, consult their emails or chat:

El ordenador es un arma de doble filo que tiene unas ventajas muy claras (...), pero que tiene la contrapartida de que una gran parte del alumnado lo relaciona con el juego o con la diversión, con que ya la clase ni es

tan seria, y muchos de ellos desconectan (PCP 7)

None of the participating teachers have received any training in including ICT in their teaching during their university studies or in the Postgraduate Teacher Training Course. For that reason they stress the importance of introducing subjects which develop the use of ICT in the English class during these studies. In the same way they point out the necessity of including this training in the teaching practice which they believe should be part of the training of secondary school teachers, in the same way as it is obligatory for primary school teachers.

4.1. Advantages and disadvantages to the use of ICT in the English class.

Among the advantages to the use of ICT in the English class, the participating teachers stress the computer as an instrument which motivates students, especially because of the wide variety of resources which it offers; the possibility to know the language, culture and the reality of English speaking countries; the autonomy proportioned to the pupil to work at his or her own rhythm; the attention to diversity especially when working with pupils with special educational needs; and finally the help they provide for maintaining discipline in the class above all in the case of conflictive groups.

As regards the disadvantages to the use of computers, the teachers interviewed named the present distribution of the computers in the classroom as not being the most suitable for the communicative dynamic which the English class requires; technical problems, such as frequent failures in the net or lack of care of the material on the part of the pupils; the lack of accessories necessary for the realization of activities related to the development of communicative aspects, such as microphones, earphones or loudspeakers on every table; the duration of each lesson which is not sufficient to allow for the loss of time which switching on all the computers in the class supposes, classes in which the majority have an elevated number of students, and with which a teacher with few computer skills has to cope. Some teachers argued that this lack of training in using ICT in the classroom, in some cases leads to the teacher losing control of the class and therefore a loss of authority: “*Me quita autoridad con los alumnos ya que yo quiero llegar a clase y controlar la situación. Con las TIC no puedo*” (PCP3). In many cases all this results in the impossibility of completing the subject program. Despite the fact that it is an aspect that only a few of the teachers interviewed mention, it is important to point out that at times the use of the computer is considered to be an interruption in the normal dynamic of the class because it requires a different regrouping of students to work with ICT and in effect, a different class with different objectives:

Para mí siempre ha supuesto una especie de interrupción de la actividad para hacer frente al ordenador porque la experiencia es que siempre han dado problemas; siempre he tenido que reagrupar a mis alumnos de otra manera, siempre ha habido un ordenador que no funciona, una clave que no entra, he tenido que llamar al técnico y disponemos de cincuenta minutos. Con lo cual, cuando se habla de Nuevas Tecnologías es que en esa clase solo voy a utilizar eso. Es decir, es una clase diferente, de planteamientos distintos (PCP 2)

4.2. Normalization of ICT in the English class

A minority believe the normalization of ICT has been achieved exclusively among the students. But in general the teachers of English who participated in this study consider that normalization of ICT in the English class has not been achieved, and in fact it will not be easy for this process to occur in the very near future. Among the impediments for achieving this normalization, the most important is the lack of training of the teachers in new technologies. To a lesser extent they point out the excessive dependence on textbooks in the English class, the lack of time to experiment with new resources or the discipline problems in the centers.

Half the teachers interviewed do not believe in the usefulness of carrying out a process of normalization of ICT in the English class in the centers of Secondary Education in the province of Badajoz. They do not consider positive that so much importance is given to their use, as they believe that for teaching it is more useful to count on a great variety of didactic resources.

One of the main problems affecting this normalization is that the teachers in the participating schools do not have any type of specialized pedagogic advice for including ICT in the English class. The only help they receive is from

other colleagues who know more about their use. The most important is that both experts in programming for education purposes and the classroom teachers, who are the ones who really know the needs for integrating ICT in the teaching-learning process, should work together and achieve in this way a dialogue between pedagogical and technological perspectives, and so, “related dichotomies such as practice-theory, doing-thinking and learning-teaching might be provisionally reconciled around the challenge of effective designs for educational interaction and applied knowledge building” (Richards, 2006, p.242) .

The activities which are usually carried out with the help of ICT in the English class are those aimed at reinforcement and grammatical vocabulary revision. Despite the fact that the majority believe it would be very positive to use ICT to practice communicative aspects, they do not have the necessary means for that.

As regards the computer applications used, the Net and the CDs provided by the different publishers are the most widely used by the English teachers. There exists a wide group which coincides in claiming that the material and the computer applications on the market neither adapt to the programs of English language subject, nor to the contents which they have to impart in the classroom. Only four of the participants claim to have taken part in the elaboration of computer materials for the English class, among which they mention the creation of blogs, power point presentations and the program “*hot potatoes*”.

Despite the fact that since the 2008-2009 academic year, the Education Committee has made obligatory the inclusion of aspects related to ICT in the subject programs, the majority of the teachers claim that these do not include either evaluation or the activities to be carried out using computers. The rest claim that they are only referred to in very general terms: “No, no. Vamos a ver, en la programación aparece que se tienen en cuenta las TIC, pero no hay nada concreto. No, desde el momento que no hay ningún trabajo específico sobre TIC, ni con ordenadores, ni nada” (PCP9)

5. Conclusions and proposals

The majority of the teachers interviewed consider that ICT supposes a great advance for education in general, but as things are now, none of them consider that they have proved a revolution in the field of education, in part because computers are used to work in the same way as in traditional teaching. Neither are they in favour of an excessive use of computers in the language classroom because they consider that they interrupt their development and their usual dynamics. The system or the methodology employed up to now are to a large extent responsible for this type of attitude. The truth is that the general perception of the teachers is that the use of the computer in the classroom continues to be for the pupils, synonymous with play, entertainment and amusement; they consider it a prize or recompense.

Fabry and Higgs (1997, p.393) claimed almost twenty years ago that: “If the integration of technology in the classroom in the next ten years is to look any different from the last ten, we must focus time, money and resources in the areas that can have the greatest impact for our students, our teachers”. Unfortunately, almost twenty years later, we can affirm that the introduction of ICT has not changed significantly the methodology of English teaching, at least in the province of Badajoz. We cannot talk of the normalization of ICT to a large extent because the opinion of teachers has not been taken into consideration, and after all they are the ones who have in their hands the control of the changes necessary to bring them about. For that reason the first proposal of the present study is that teachers be provided with the instruments necessary to be able to integrate successfully ICT in the classroom. Promoting an integral training programme beginning at the university with the introduction of subjects which foment the use of ICT in the English classroom; offering more in service improvement courses which take into consideration the real needs of the classroom, and which are specialized for each area of knowledge. Training which should be accompanied by pedagogical advice, indispensable if ICT are to be included in the practice of teaching.

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