ISSN 1804-4158

GREEK LANGUAGE TEACHING BY MEANS OF TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion of technology in the process of second language acquisition has always been a priority for teachers and students. This article reviews the current trends in using technology based on language instructions in Greek language teaching educational settings. Although it has been demonstrated that the use of technology as an instructional medium provides unique learning qualities, it has not been entirely embraced by Greek language teachers and professors in Albania. Furthermore, recent advancements of internet services provide remarkable possibilities for supporting a variety of learning activities in Greek language classrooms. Yet, classroom practice in using technology has not gone too far beyond simple viewing and listening to video content for eliciting discussion among Greek language students. This paper particularly highlights the role of technology in the process of improving student skills.

UDC & KEYWORDS

■ UDC: 376 ■ GREEK LANGUAGE ■ LANGUAGE ACQUISITION ■ MODERN TECHNOLOGY ■ PRESENTATION SKILLS ■ PRONUNCIATION

INTRODUCTION

The number of Greek Language Learners is rapidly increasing in Albania and this, as a result of an increasing number of Albanian immigrants returning from Greece into their home country. Particularly, it is interesting to note that Greek language teachers in Albania are finally embracing technological advancements for supporting Greek language learning in our country. Throughout the last decades, a variety of technologies including computers, audio, and video devices have become an integral part of Greek language learning in many institutions of higher educational level in Albania. However, recent studies in Europe member countries indicate that learning technologies are primarily a part of foreign language curricula in higher education, while in Albanian education settings technology is not as present as it should be expected in the digital age of today. With regard to the above mentioned clue, lack of systematic and organized approaches in integrating this means of education in schools is very apparent. As argued by different teachers, professors and students, investigation and in-depth analysis of the advantages of the instructional use of technology is in its initial phase. Studies also suggest that the integration of technology in classroom activities at all learning levels with a high standard selection of teaching methods may increase a full extent of foreign language learning effectiveness.

Other studies carried out by high school teachers clearly indicate a strong necessity for more practical research in this area. They are mainly focused on the efficacy of modern technology to increase fluency and pronunciation for Greek language learners. So far, it has been demonstrated that technology in all its shapes and forms, has the potential to improve reading fluency by allowing the students see themselves performing with and without errors. The reading process is a critical skill for all foreign language students, and it is imperative for teachers and school personnel to have a rudimentary understanding of technology based language learning process, in order to avoid creating incorrect conclusions. Based on the above mentioned findings, it is highly recommended that the importance of technology usage in the area of language learning to be highlighted as a facilitating resource for all foreign language learners. One of the main research variables in this study is associated with the student accomplishment in listening and translating skills, as well as vocabulary acquisition.

Another point stressed in this study shows the positive implications of using up to date technology in the language classroom. Instructional video materials as one of the most used technology means in Greek language teaching process, significantly contribute to the development of all the three mainly observed aspects: listening, translating skills, and student's vocabulary. The study findings confirm the benefits of digital video usage in the learning environment utilized during the learning process.

There are multiple instructional advantages of modern technology in comparison to printed materials, such as rich visual support, audio component, enhanced contextualization, and better control over the medium (slow motion play or possibility to record student's voice) as well a boundless resource of information available in the internet. As such, Greek language teachers in Albania have relatively limited insights into scientific explanations of the educational potential and benefits of utilizing technology in classroom settings. Thus, it is our purpose to emphasize the best practices of advanced technology integration in teaching Greek language in all classroom levels, focusing on using all means of technology to improve pronunciation and overall student presentation skills. The results might not be limited to the area of Greek language instruction only. They may be beneficial for all instructors regardless of the language taught in the school. Undoubtedly, the instructional qualities of video technology extend beyond a particular field of study, such as Greek as a Second Language.

The instructional value of technology should not be underestimated. In comparison to the printed instructional materials (e.g. textbook, dictionaries, worksheets, etc.) video content and other means of technology provide learners with additional qualities, which may be critical for boosting second language acquisition. The quality of being able to hear and see synchronous communication, communicators' gestures, gazes, paralinguistic cues, facial expressions, and lip movements are very important. For example, Swaffar and Vlatten (1997) argue that video is a multi-sensory medium, which significantly contributes to the overall student involvement in the learning process. All of these additional elements help language students to more easily grasp the

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meaning of the spoken language between two or more communicators. Other authors (Herron, et. al., 1995; Hişmanoğlu, 2006; Weyers, 1999) also reported that technology can support learning efforts by improving long-term listening comprehension skills, student confidence, and pronunciation proficiency.

The teaching of foreign languages is a complex process that actively involves multiple senses. The use of pictures provides individual students with a tool to connect the new word to a known meaning, thus facilitating understanding and memorization. Words are decoded into sounds that bring languages to life (sign languages being exceptions). The student must also learn how to place the words within sentences to establish effective communication. Although languages can be learned as an individual enterprise, fluency is developed only through the involvement of a group.

The process of learning a second language may be structured in different ways – in a classroom or at home, with or without a teacher, emphasizing or minimizing grammar, gradually exposing the student to native speakers or prompt immersion. No matter where and how the learning occurs, information and communication technologies (ICT) are powerful tools to improve the teaching/learning process.

The technologies that can be implemented in the learning process

The use of a CD player as an auxiliary tool in foreign language classes is not new. Many books come with CDs that are used to reinforce pronunciation and habituate the student with the different phonemes. New technologies have entered the education field in the past decade. Teachers and professors are provided with a list of technologies that have been used with some success to teach Greek as a second language.

Customizing, Template, and Authoring Programs - These are computer programs that enable teachers to design their own software. Some are simple templates; others are sophisticated programs using multimedia capability.

Teachers can choose an authoring program that better fits their technical skills and design it according to their teaching styles and students' needs.

Compact Disk-Read Only Memory - CDROM discs have large storage capacity and can be utilized for a variety of media, including text, graphics, video, and audio. Some CD-ROM discs can store as much as 650 megabytes of information, the equivalent to the entire text of a 20-volume encyclopedia. Different from tapes, which wear out with use, CD-ROM discs resist time and manipulation. They can be used to access dictionaries, databases, interactive books, and other products. However, since they are read-only, they do not offer the flexibility of an authoring program.

Interactive Videodisc - Videodiscs are also a durable medium to display visual information. Like the CDROM discs, they are read by a laser beam and therefore, do not wear with usage. The sound in a videodisc is stored in two different tracks and can be played separately.

Thus, the disc can offer two different languages for the same content, or have one track for the student and another for the teacher. In some cases the disc player is connected to a computer and controlled through a software program, thus offering maximum interactivity.

Digital Audio - Similar to a traditional tape recorder program, in a digital audio program the student listens to a word or a phrase spoken by a native speaker. Then, he or she repeats the word into the computer microphone and listens as the computer plays it back. The process enables the student to improve pronunciation and listening skills. The advantage of digital audio programs over tape is the quality of sound and its durability.

Telecommunications - Telephone, fax, cell phones, and computer-related communication technologies ensure the rapid transfer of information over large distances.

Further more, the Internet provides students with the opportunity to access vast amounts of information stored electronically around the world. They can maintain electronic conversations with native speakers or other learners through e-mail and chat rooms, or join list-servers to obtain information. They can also join a distance education program to improve their knowledge, or learn a new language.

The advantages of using ICT for learning a second language

For students of a second language, ICTs promote:

Multi-sensorial stimuli – ICTs, particularly television and computer-related technologies, have the capability to diversify the delivery of information using visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimuli. Students can see the words on the screen, while hearing them being pronounced by a native speaker. Movement adds interest to the scene, bringing enjoyment to a process that may be slow and demanding;

Motivation – Research shows that students who use technology are likely to stay on task for longer periods of time. Even a simple technology, such as radio, offers a variety of strategies – music, drama-like plots, or comic situations – to attract and maintain the students' attention.

Collaborative learning – The Internet opens new horizons for the foreign language student by facilitating communication with native speakers through e-mail and audio-digital conferencing. Television and radio programs also offer opportunities for students to be together and participate in common experiences.

Cultural understanding – Radio, television, movies and the Internet bridge physical and cultural distances. Students get acquainted with the ways of life of people whose language they are learning. They can visit the distant places without leaving their home. They see the landscapes, the people and their tradition, thus making learning the language part of a cultural experience.

Self-expression – Through recordings or multimedia programs, individuals who are shy or insecure can practice the language in a safe environment, until they are confident to speak in public. Those who are creative, have the opportunities to explore their talents and curiosity without the limitations of a classroom.

The barriers of using ICT

The use of ICT is not a magic potion that ensures the success of a second language class. Among the barriers to success, three are particularly important:

Lack of familiarity with the technology – Many teachers will try, or are required to use technology without previous experience or adequate training. They lack an adequate understanding of the technology potential and limitations, and they are unable to deal with even the minimum technical anomalies that will certainly occur. For these teachers,

the technology is a dream never realized and the feeling is one of frustration.

Lack of adequate plans – Technology is a tool to help the teacher and students reach educational tools, and never a goal in itself. When the technology is not integrated within the overall lesson plan, the outcomes cannot be successful.

Lack of access – The most powerful technologies, such as the Internet, are also the most expensive, in the sense that they require existing infrastructure, or a massive initial investment to build this structure (buy computer hardware and software, establish connectivity, pay for services, etc.). Less expensive technologies are also less powerful. For instance, radio is inexpensive to buy and can be used anywhere in the world. In places without electricity, solar-powered stations can broadcast radio programs to a relatively large audience. However, radio does not have the multimedia and interactive capabilities of the Internet, and requires a captive audience, which must be present during broadcast time.

Investment of Money

Uses of new technologies in the long run tend to result in higher productivity, at least in the foreign language acquisition sphere. Productivity in education is certainly harder to measure, but it is not unreasonable to assume that over time new technologies will help create more effective education. In any case, whatever results may be achieved over the long term, there are definite startup expenses related to implementing new technologies in education. For college language learning programs, such expenses usually entail hardware, software, staffing, and training for at least one networked computer laboratory where students can drop in and use assigned software and one or more networked computer laboratories where teachers can bring whole classes on an occasional or regular basis. Intelligent use of new technologies usually involves allocations of about one-third for hardware, one-third for software, and one third for staff support and training. It is often the case in poorly-funded language programs that the hardware itself comes in via a one-time grant, with little funding left over for staff training, maintenance, or software.

Investment of Time

Just as technologies may save money over the long term, they may also save time. But, potential long-term benefits to an institution are little consolation to an individual teacher who is spending enormous amounts of time learning constantly-changing software programs and trying to figure out the best way to use them in the classroom. Increased demands on time are due in part to the difficulty of using new online multimedia technologies in their still-early stages (comparable, perhaps, to the early days of tuning a radio or starting a car when those machines were first invented). However, time demands are caused not only from learning how to master the technology, but also from the changing dynamics of the online classroom.

As indicated earlier, new technologies create excellent opportunities for long-distance exchanges. Such exchanges can be extremely complicated in terms of coordinating goals, schedules, and plans, especially when involving teachers from different countries or different educational systems.

Also, another benefit of electronic communication is that it provides opportunities for student-initiated communication can also create a time burden, as a teacher's e-mail box becomes flooded with messages from previously-reticent students.

Accessing Resources and Publishing on the World Wide Web

The World Wide Web offers a vast array of resources from throughout the world. While the majority of Web pages are in English, increasing numbers exist in other commonly-taught (and some uncommonly-taught) languages, including Spanish, French, German, Greek etc. Accessing and using these pages in language education supports a socio-cognitive approach by helping immerse students in discourses that extend well beyond the classroom, their immediate communities, and their language textbook. This is particularly critical for foreign language students who otherwise experience the target culture only through their instructor and selected curricula. Students can use Web pages as authentic materials for conducting research on culture and current events or for gathering material for class projects and simulations. Students can also publish their own work on the World Wide Web, thus enabling writing for a real audience. In some cases, teachers have created in-class online newsletters or magazines that their classes have produced. In other cases, teachers help their students contribute to international Web magazines which include articles from many students. And in other situations, students work together in collaborative teams and then publish the results of their projects on the Web.

One particularly creative application pairs new technologies with service learning, in which students perform an authentic service for community organizations. For example, students work in small groups to make a Web site on behalf of a community organization. They interview learners, gather information and documents from them, and put everything together in a coherent online package, learning both writing and presentation skills in the process. When referring to internet based materials students should be quite selective and cite only reliable resources.

Conclusion

Technology is an essential part of the educational world and, if used properly, can effectively promote successful language acquisition. One part of being a successful language learner is to be able to pronounce words correctly, which can be a very challenging task for some students. Role playing is one of the techniques that has been used by teachers for a long time and which engages students in active language use. By videotaping students are able to do role-playing in various situations and by using i-Movie video-editing software to create videos, teachers provide the students with an opportunity to practice pronunciation and presentation skills through active participation. Through classroom observations, it seems that the integration of different types of technology in the teaching and learning environment increases students' motivation and provides them with feedback on their language skills.

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