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LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH ICT

Information and Communication Technology is the buzz word of the 21st century. With incredible finesse it has changed the nature of sharing, storage and dissemination of information. According to UNESCO, "ICT is a scientific, technological and engineering discipline and management technique used in handling information, its application and association with social, economical and cultural matters." The present papereals with the importance of ICT in teaching language skills.

Using ICT can help pupils to:
o Access, select and interpret information;
o Recognise patterns, relationships and behaviours;
o Model, predict and hypothesise;
o Test reliability and accuracy;
o Review and modify their work to improve the quality;
o Communicate with others and present information;
o Evaluate their work;
o Improve efficiency;
o Be creative and take risks;
o Gain confidence and independence.

ICT can be used to integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing. It enhances interactive teaching and learning styles. It also extends pupils' ability to exercise choice, work independently and make connections between their work in English and in other subjects. For example, ICT can help pupils:
o use a wide range of strategies to explore contrasts, comparisons and connections dynamically;
o annotate text in innovative ways;
o enrich or broaden the context of literary study;
o see texts in alternative versions;
o use a wide range of analytical and critical techniques;
o sort and process text and data quickly and efficiently;
o order and arrange text and data experimentally, using combinations of word, image, sound and hypertext;
o save, record, edit and adapt their work quickly and efficiently;
o retain evidence of the editing process so that it can be examined;
o change the organisational structure and qualities of texts to suit different audiences and purposes;
o compose multi-authored texts;
o select from a wider range of audiences, throughout the world;
o exercise choice of medium and design while composing.

ICT has been found highly relevant in developing all the four skills of language learning. Following studies will support this viewpoint

Reading. An evaluation of Computer Assisted Learning (CAL), in particular reading support software called RITA (Reader's Interactive Teaching Assistant) used with eight students (mean age 11.7) needing intensive support in one comprehensive secondary school over ten weeks. Findings suggest it can be effective for most students with reading failure in secondary school. The effect of three weekly twenty-minute sessions was measured pre- and post- test. It was most effective for non-dyslexic children, with significant progress in those areas targeted and less progress in areas not targeted in Individual Education Plans. Mean scores did increase for each test, especially for reading and comprehension, and it reversed the general downward slide in standard scores. Highly variable results in spelling may have been due to a school-wide spelling initiative that caused extra difficulty. The least impressive results were for two ESL students where the computer-generated speech may have been too poor to assist with their comprehension difficulties. There were significantly higher levels of enthusiasm and commitment than with traditional approaches. (Lynch, L. UK)

Nicolson, R. describes a small study with students aged 6 and 8 identified as being most at risk of reading failure. The RITA (Reader's Interactive Teaching Assistant) system was used with HyperCard 2.3 on Apple Macintosh computers. RITA is a flexible system which allows the teacher to tailor individual activities for the students, automatically storing and analysing the results. The study found that RITA was as successful as using a previously administered traditional intervention approach, with very satisfactory educational effectiveness and cost effectiveness. However, RITA was significantly more cost effective in improving the reading skills of junior school students. Additionally, the students using RITA showed higher levels of motivation than with the traditional approach. However, as successful as computer assisted learning (CAL) appears to be, it is likely that around 10 per cent of the cohort will need to be provided with continuing support. (UK)

Spelling scores increased from 6.6 to 6.9 and comprehension scores increased from 9.23 to 9.62 during the trial. Findings concluded that the system was more effective at improving reading than spelling and students with specific reading difficulties made little or no progress with the system. (UK)

The second study examined the impact of computer-based spelling practice on the levels of motivation of children with reading failure. The students showed more positive behavior during practice with the computer and less during classroom instruction. Computer-assisted spelling practice also helped them to improve their spelling. (Netherlands)

Speaking and listening. Between October 2001 and March 2002 Becta ran a Digital Video pilot project involving 50 schools from across the UK. The aim of the project was to gather evidence of the impact of DV technology on pupils' engagement and behaviors, and to identify models of effective practice. Becta commissioned the British Film Institute to undertake an evaluation of the Digital Video pilot project. Their report looks at patterns of use and good practice in Digital Video, and considers how the technology has increased pupils' motivation, broadened access to the curriculum and has fostered both creativity and moving image literacy. The report contains key findings, analysis, case studies and recommendations.

A research study was conducted into the development of a child-friendly computer software program to enhance the early literacy skills of reception-aged children. The ergonomic aspects of designing software for young students are described, along with two studies of reception aged children using the story and vocabulary parts of the program. Multimedia activities such as storybook reading, communicative writing and language games had an impact on students' oral and written language development, with significant gains in vocabulary development of ethnic minority students (Netherlands).

Writing. Breese conducted a study on the use of ICT in developing writing skill. This study investigates the effects of unlimited access to word processors on students writing over a period of 20 months. Each of the 7 students was given a laptop to use for all their writing in English lessons. Samples of their narrative writing were compared with samples from a parallel class who only used hand writing methods. Students using word processors showed significant improvement over those using pen and paper.

These studies suggest that ICT can enable pupils to understand, visualise and interpret difficult texts. Students with learning difficulties who use CAI in reading, increase performance in reading, decoding and reading comprehension. Moreover ICT also enables the learners to go beyond the text and relate the text with real life. While using technology I found that a simple and interesting story like 'Little Match Girl' sensitizes the students about the plight of the poor and unprivileged people and they develop humanitarian outlook towards mankind. A simple poem like 'I Love a Tree' if taught with proper use of ICT enables students to develop love for nature and environmental concerns. Whereas the lesson 'A Food Chain Story' when taught with proper graphics inculcates respect and honour for all living creatures as it successfully presents inter-dependence of all creatures. Use of ICT in a lesson like 'Weird Science' gives a bird's eye views of many more such type of inventions. These lessons taught by my students in the schools generated interest and insatiable curiosity among learners which in itself is the hallmark of true learning.

ICT in Practice: going beyond the classroom - Thus ICT not only makes language learning easy and fun but also spices the text with real life experiences which make a learner more broad minded and humane. ICT when used properly enables a student to go beyond the textbook to have the feel in real life situations. A lesson on child labour encourages a student to get more information about the condition of child labour in different parts of the world and also to think and devise the ways to help and support them. The students may be also asked to carry out small research related with the topic. This undoubtedly will sharpen their mental abilities and make them more creative. At Waymade College, student teachers prepare various projects on the basic themes of the lesson. For example while teaching the lesson Heart; they also collect information about preventive measures to keep our heart healthy and strong. While teaching the lesson Shipwreck, they collect information about shipwrecks and how they could have been avoided. A lesson on Pollution motivates them to know of the possible causes and steps required to stop that. INTERNET they collect the relevant information. Similarly a poem on river makes the student teachers collect pictures of ever flowing rivers filled with sparkling clean water as well as polluted dirty rivers of today. Thus making them think over the present scenario. Poems like 'I Love a Tree' when taught with the use of technology succeeded in developing environmental awareness and sensitivity towards nature. Kindling the spark of imagination, making students aware of the reality existing outside classroom, stretching their perception, sensitizing them with the values, refining their perceptions are some of the merits of using ICT in classroom.