"INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AS A SOURCE OF MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING"

BELINDA MAIA

Faculdade de Letras, Universidade do Porto.

0. Introduction

When I first started teaching at the British Institute in Lisbon in the early 70s, the language laboratory was the 'in' technology we were all expected to use. There were those who were keen on using it and made full use of the possibilities offered, regarding themselves as progressive and 'scientific'. The very word 'laboratory' was typical of a time when most people - and many academics - still respected the 'cause' and 'effect' mentality of Behaviourism.

On the other hand, there were those who rejected it because it was 'mechanical' and 'impersonal' and who, having been educated in the anti-scientific atmosphere of the humanities, were sceptical of the benefits offered. If they were being honest, however, they would admit to a fear of the implication that the language laboratory might come to substitute the teacher.

1. Attitudes

The emphasis of suppliers of any form of teaching technology has always been on the idea that students can use it to teach themselves, thus, at least theoretically, saving on teachers. Commercially-run institutions tend to eagerly embrace technology for this reason, as much as for the need to appear up-to-date. When one pays high fees, one expects to have one's money's worth, and up-to-date technology can provide this illusion, if not the reality. State run institutions often suffer from a lack of funds which tends to discourage even the most enthusiastic supporters of technology.

However, this is a facile distinction to make. One could say that commercially-run institutions tend to be run by administrators who are more open-minded about technology, whereas universities like those represented here rely more on their teachers for direction and advice - particularly on older teachers who are often less responsive to modernisation.

Besides, nobody likes the idea that their jobs can be mechanised - and teachers are no exception. It is no coincidence that when computers are involved, language research of various kinds is often carried out by academics who defect to, (e.g. SYTRANS[1]) or make deals with, (e.g. COBUILD[2], Oxford University Press and Longmans[3]) the commercial sector or by computer engineers whose grasp of language and linguistics sometimes leaves much to be desired (e.g. whoever makes the grammar-checkers for certain word processors).

Students in the humanities also tend to fear technology. After all - many of them have opted for the humanities because of their dislike of or inability to use it. However, this tendency is changing fast as it becomes more user-friendly and generalised.

2. From language laboratory to Multimedia

As anyone who has worked seriously with a language laboratory knows, it is by no means an easy way of giving a lesson, and the teacher is hardly dispensable, particularly at the more elementary stages. However, progress has been made with materials used and students on ERASMUS scholarships returning from institutions who are lucky enough to have such laboratories report finding them very useful for practising privately. The fact that the Linguaphone system of self-teaching with recorded material, based on similar principles, is still flourishing is proof that the basic ideas of the laboratory can be productive.

Much has changed since language laboratories were first greeted with optimism. Teaching theory - and the theories of psychology which underpin it - has experienced the usual swing of the pendulum from nurture to nature, and from conditioning to communication. We have also seen the theoretical turn away from teacher as instructor to the teacher as facilitator, with the student being encouraged to take an active rather than passive part in the teaching / learning process.

Technology has become far more sophisticated. Language laboratories continue to exist and have developed in a way which encourages the student to practice independently. CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) began its appearance some time ago and it, too, can be used without a teacher being present. The former are more useful for oral/aural skills, and the latter for teaching various lexical, structural and grammatical

skills as well as simple communicative skills. The hardware for combining the strengths of both systems into multimedia centres is already with us - the software is still lagging behind, but will soon catch up.

2.1 Methodology and Use of LL and CALL

There are various arguments against using methodology which requires LL and CALL in our universities. One argument is that university teachers tend to suffer from large classes which need to be taught a lot in a limited time, and that taking time to use technology makes it difficult to fit in everything else. There is also the question - how do we evaluate their use of it? And then there is the criticism that, in the world of university language teaching, most of the commercial teaching materials available are - or should be - too elementary for university students.

The argument of large classes - with its implications that everything has to be done within the confines of normal classroom hours - and the problem of evaluation - which can poison so much of our relationship with our students - bedevil a lot of our teaching. But these arguments reflect a continuing belief by both teachers and students in the teacher in instructor rather than facilitator, and ignore the possibilities of students. individually or in groups, being encouraged to work on their own outside class time, with or without friendly supervision from the teacher.

It is true that much of the commercial material available is probably too elementary for students with university aspirations. However, university teachers are expected to create their own material. Contracts in higher education specifically stipulate at least as many hours should be dedicated to the preparation of classes and cultural activities as to actual teaching. And it should not be forgotten that a good deal of the software available for CALL is directed towards helping teachers to create their own material.

Even if our universities have not got language laboratories or CALL centres, let us imagine that they have. The truth is that many but not all of the students in the first year could well do with some remedial work, much of which could be done with the help of technology using commercial material and exercises prepared by teachers. Once the student's grasp of language has passed beyond that demanded by commercial CALL exercises, there is plenty of work that can be done. A lot depends on the capacity for invention of individual teachers. There are programmes which

help teachers create their own material - an example is OUP's software 'Adam and Eve' which allows one to make various types of cloze tests and then lets the computer monitor the student's performance.

In this way, once the techniques of using the technology have been mastered, students could well be expected to work on their own with minimal supervision. The carrot could be good, relevant exercises - the stick could be some form of obligation to use it. Colleagues in Italy tell me they programme the computer to register the number of hours and quantity of exercises done by individual students and establish a minimum that has to be done as a prerequisite to evaluation! However, this is a fairly drastic form of motivation and not one about which I wish to speak today.

3. Motivating the student - and the teacher

The keywords of this paper are 'motivation' and 'information technology', but what I am going to suggest fits into a much wider project, the aim of which is to allow more emphasis on encouraging project work and other activities which complement and run parallel to normal class work. Other activities could be acting (I have done this in the past and I believe all teachers who have tried it find it extremely rewarding), debating (the British Council is trying to start debating competitions in Portugal), producing student magazines, creative writing (Walter Best (1998) told us how this could done at the last conference) or whatever other language-based activities individual teachers find they can promote most satisfactorily.

All of the activities I have just mentioned are ideal if you believe that students can and should be encouraged to work independently, with the teacher's role being that of providing incentives and encouragement, as well as devising some way in which the work produced is used to full advantage - cultural weeks which will allow students to take part in debating competitions, plays, revues, poetry reading, and magazines which can serve as news bulletins and a outlet for creative work.

As with these activities, the most essential thing to remember about the use of the new technologies is that they too are not suited to teacher-centred teaching. To think one can take a large class into a computer room - no matter how well equipped - and expect them all to use the Internet to connect into a selection of sites predetermined by the teacher is, as anyone who has tried it will tell you, more than technology can yet cope with. Besides, it runs counter to the whole idea of learning through discovery with the teacher acting as a guide or facilitator.

Although I am willing to admit there are a few students who come to university with the idea of getting a certificate by doing as little work as possible, I believe that the majority come here with far more idealistic notions. I also believe wholeheartedly with Tim Johns[4] who says that one should never underestimate the intelligence of one's students and that one should do the best to exploit their intelligence and creativity to the benefit of all concerned. This cannot be done properly within the confines of the normal teaching timetable. Nor can it be assumed that every student has to develop in exactly the same way as everyone else.

4. The new technologies as a source of motivation

4.1 Corpora

Before going on to talk of the type of work which will give incentive to students at a more general level, I cannot resist drawing attention first to an area of IT in which I personally have a considerable interest - electronic corpora and all that can be done with them to encourage teachers and students to find out the answers to their questions about language by looking at the evidence.

It is an area which offers immense potential for the university language teacher. One does not need the British National Corpus to do this, although the CD-ROM version of 200 million words - all tagged - is not beyond the aspirations of any university's budget, and anyone who needs examples of a word in context can get up to 50 examples off their Internet site for free[5]. ELRA[6] is the European funded project which is responsible for bringing together as much electronic material as possible. This has been done in order to bring together all the material being gathered in different places - as well as to solve the legal and copyright problems posed by such collections. And then there are projects building smaller and more specialised corpora - comparable corpora of similar genres (like the Aarhus Business School legal corpus in several different languages), parallel corpora (such as those at UMIST[7] and Bergen[8]), language learner's corpora (University of Louvain[9]) and others.

It is also perfectly possible to collect quite large amounts of raw electronic text oneself more or less legitimately - for use with programmes like Microconcord, Multiconcord[10] or WORDSMITH[11]. There are several thousand works of literature, newsprint galore, and endless amounts of

text on all kinds of subjects - all freely downloadable off the Internet. And there are plenty of CD-ROMs that can be used for a variety of exercises. Chris Tribble (1997) has shown how he uses Encarta to help students develop informative writing skills.

Once one has a corpus, the possibilities for research at various levels are enormous. Some of you may have seen or used the COBUILD books of concordances which were the result of the enthusiasm of such as Tim Johns. The books may seem rather limited, but the idea behind them - particularly if backed by the ability to concordance a corpus - is very interesting, as some of you probably know. A student who can see the pattern of a particular grammatical structure - or study the collocations of certain vocabulary items by looking at lots of examples in context, can usually deduce useful information more effectively than by listening to any amount of theoretical preparation and doing traditional exercises. The only problem that may arise is that - if let loose on a corpus like this - the student may come up with examples that disprove one of your pet theories. Elena Bonelli[12] had this experience too, but found it interesting and constructive. For example - for those of you who, after years of correcting 'in what concerns' to 'as far as x is concerned' are becoming half-inclined to accept the former, please note that 'in what concerns' is not to be found in the 50-60 million words of the Times that we have concordanced for this purpose.

In my translation classes, my students and I have developed various types of project work which involve the collection of mini-corpora on specific subjects and constructing glossaries from them - often building on the many ready-made ones to be found on the Internet[13]. This technique could easily be modified for general language teaching use. Many of us have tried to encourage our students over the years to try and find out about some news story as it is told in different newspapers - as a way of broadening vocabulary and studying different styles, not to mention different varieties of the 'truth'. It used to require their spending quite a bit of money - now it can be done far more thoroughly and for next to nothing by consulting the newspapers on-line.

4.2 The Internet

The Internet is probably the biggest revolution in communication ever. Its critics love to say:

- it is full of rubbish - but then so is any bookshop or magazine stand
- that it is slow - but it is still quicker than searching for information in more traditional ways
- and that it is not that easy to find one's way about - but surely it is easier to find things there than by more conventional means?

The media love to play upon parents' fears by preaching the perils of pornography and paedophiles. When I was in England before Easter, a teachers' conference was largely in the news because of its preoccupation with these problems. Far be it from me to condone the activities of pornographers and paedophiles, and perhaps, as university teachers, we can be thankful that our students should be old enough to cope, and even, perhaps, use even this negative aspect of the Internet positively. However, these arguments are often used by people unable or unwilling to come to terms with the implications of the Internet as a source of unlimited and uncensored information. Obviously it will be misused, but I for one have a strong faith in the basic sanity of most people who use it.

With so much information and so many 'genuine texts' at the teachers' and students' disposal, the potential for exploiting the Internet for language teaching, or teaching generally, is immense. It need only threaten the teachers who, hitherto secure in the limitations of the university library and local bookstores, now find the brighter students challenging them with up-to-date information or controversial theories found on the Net.

If the Internet is a tireless supplier of information, it is also an uncritical receiver of information. This means that teachers and students can create Web pages and produce material for them - excellent practice for writing skills with the added incentive of providing some objective for them. This has been done by various members of the English department in FLUP, led by Ian Rowcliffe and Albina Silva. It has proved a real incentive for hard-working groups of students and will be hearing more about the ups and downs of such an experiment from Ian later.

4.3 Open and Distance Learning

Open and Distance learning, which aims to provide virtual mobility for students who are unable to take advantage of the ERASMUS scheme, is still in its infancy. However, it is an area which should prove of immense value to anyone interested in encouraging exchange of views and promoting

co-operative work between students in different countries or even different parts of their own countries. It requires considerable imagination and a capacity for experimentation to achieve positive results. FLUP has had the opportunity to participate in an EC funded experiment of this kind and the experience was most rewarding[14].

Whether or not one achieves the more ambitious aims of ODL or making Web pages, simply encouraging students to use electronic mail encourages communicative writing skills, and the future is bright for the practising of oral skills through voice mail and videoconferencing.

4.3 The future

The key word in my last sentence was 'future', because there are still a lot of technicalities to be ironed out. For example, the evocative 'surfing' of the Internet could, at times, more suitably be described, as Ian Rowcliffe once put it, as 'fishing'. One of the problems is that many of the expectations created by even an average PC are not yet realisable by the telecommunications technology available. Neither the network of services at present in place at university level nor those in use on a national or even international level have been able to cope adequately with the explosion of public interest in everything that the Internet implies. Yet, they said the Internet would crash last year and this year. It has yet to happen. Technology will be fully encouraged to keep up with developments - if only because most democratic politicians realise that there is too much at stake to allow for breakdown.

5. Conclusions

I realise that for many people here I am preaching to the converted, but I am sure these people will agree with me when I say that patience is needed - but not the sort of patience that waits for someone else to solve all the problems before one condescends to use the ready-made materials. On the contrary, we should all be in there and helping to make events happen to the best advantage. Technology is never the only answer to all our problems - but to ignore what it offers and not to channel it towards our interests is to miss out on a lot.

For those of you who have listened to me with less tolerance and understanding and - to quote a Danish colleague - hope that if you ignore

technology long enough it will end up by going away and not bothering you, may I extend a word of warning. A rough review of our students here suggests that whereas only about 20% of those in the 3rd year are computer literate, over 60% of the first year claim to be. Computer-literacy is fast becoming the norm, not a fashion. The incoming students will become even more disillusioned with university life than they already are if they fail to find the technology which is taken for granted in the world today, and they have to face teachers unprepared or unwilling to use it imaginatively. Our outgoing students will need to cultivate the outlook and skills that the new technologies provide, whether they want to be teachers, translators, or become professionals in any other area for which our courses are supposed to prepare them.

Conventional wisdom has long argued in favour of a lighter load of actual teaching hours for students in both secondary and higher education, with more time being given to involving students in independent study, project work and other mind-broadening activities. This is not an argument for getting rid of teachers. On the contrary, if these reforms are to go ahead, they will need teachers who will take an active role in promoting such activities. If not, then the cut in teaching hours will be just that, and no one will gain. What I have discussed here is only one way in which teachers can develop this new role, but it is a good example. The university is meant to lead intellectual progress and innovation, and university teachers are meant to be pioneers of new ideas - not followers of fashion.

Bibliography

Best, Walter. 1999. 'English Writing Workshop: creation, application and adapta-
tion'. In *Actas do 4º Encontro Nacional do Ensino das Línguas Vivas no ensino
Superior em Portugal.* Porto: Faculdade de Lertras da Universidade de Porto.

Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, Barbara & Melia, Patrick James (eds) *PALC '97 Prac-
tical Applications in Language Corpora.* Lodz: Lodz University Press.

Maia, Belinda. 1997. 'Do-it-yourself corpora ... with a little bit of help from your
friends!', in Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Patrick James Melia (eds)
403-410.

Maia, Belinda. 1997. 'Making corpora - a learning process'. University of Bologna
website - CULT papers - http://www.sslmit.unibo.it/cultpaps

Melby, Alan. 1995. *The Possibility of Language.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John
Benjamins Pub. Co.

MCENERY, Tony & WILSON, Andrew. 1996. *Corpus Linguistics.* Edinburgh
University Press.

Sinclair, J.M. (ed.) 1987. *Looking Up - An account of the COBUILD Project in lexical
computing.* London and Glasgow : Collins ELT.

Stubbs, Michael. 1996. *Text and Corpus Analysis.* Oxford : Blackwell Publishers.

Tribble, Chris. 1997. 'Improvising corpora for ELT: quick-and-dirty ways of developing
corpora for language teaching.' in Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Patrick
James Melia (eds)

[1] SYSTRAN - the machine translation programme behind http://babelfish.alta-
vista.com. See also http://www.systran.com/. For further study on MT see: Melby (1995).

[2] COBUILD - Collins Birmingham University International Language Database. See:
Sinclair (ed) 1987.

[3] Oxford University Press and Longmans have always furthered linguistic and
corpora research at universities like London and Lancaster.

[4] Tim Johns - see his Web page - http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/homepage.html

[5] British National Corpus Web page - http://thetis.bl.uk/

[6] ELRA - European Languages Resources Association - http://www.icp.grenet.fr/
ELRA/home.html

[7] UMIST - http://www.ccl.umisty.ac.uk/staff/mona/tec.html

[8] Bergen - ICAME at http://hd.uib.no/icame.html

[9] University of Louvain - http://www.fltr.ucl.ac.be/fltr/germ/germ.html

[10] Multiconcord - see http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/timconc.html

[11] WORDSMITH - see http://www.oup.co.uk/isbn/0-19-459283-9

[12] Elena Bonelli (personal communication).

[13] Bertinoro papers - http://sslmit.unibo.it/cultpaps

[14] University of Salford - http://www.salford.ac.uk