

THE FEATURES AND TYPES OF MULTIMEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

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Annotation: This article is about the features and types of multimedia technologies.

Keywords: *multimedia technologies, virtual learning, ICT, internet.*

It is becoming increasingly frequent for language teachers to incorporate new teaching and learning approaches into their classroom practice, including the use of computer technology. Commonly known as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) or sometimes called ILT (Information and Learning Technology), these technologies have been greatly influential in creating new opportunities for innovative teaching approaches, especially in language teaching. Indeed, many teachers are fast becoming aware of the potential for “interactive”, language-in-use projects which have ITC as a key element of the teaching process. Innovative uses of Internet and other ICT tools can easily provide opportunities for collaborative language projects which focus on “using the language to learn the language”. Perhaps even more importantly, the new practices developing from the integration of Internet use in EFL or ESL classrooms is ushering in unexpected changes in language teaching objectives.

Virtual learning environments provide new and unique ways in which to convey cultural knowledge and develop intercultural communication skills. High-fidelity graphics, sound, and animation make it possible for them to simulate many tangible aspects of a specific culture, such as buildings, streets, art, dress, speech, gestures, and more. This enables the provision of more authentic computer-based practice environments than may otherwise be feasible using traditional live role-play and media based approaches.

Cultural training programs have evolved substantially in the last six decades. The earliest examples began to surface after World War II when international travel and collaboration became more prevalent in business and government work. As the need for these programs became more evident, scientific interest in creating theories of intercultural growth, identifying underlying cognitive processes, and demonstrating their effectiveness also grew. The field of intercultural training is highly interdisciplinary, attracting researchers from a variety of fields, including anthropology, cognitive psychology, social science, business, and more. Surprisingly, very little of this work leverages state of the art computing technology. The usual structure of intercultural training programs includes a blend of didactic and experiential components, including methods such as lectures, discussion, film, case study, and role playing (Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004). Many of these methods are based on a classroom instruction model and seek to leverage peer interaction and debate to engage learners. Typically, the goal is to induce changes in knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes. Knowledge includes basic facts about a new culture, such as common values and beliefs, preferences for physical contact, or typical eating and drinking patterns. Skills usually refer to the learner’s ability to interact with someone from the new culture, including communicating their desires and interpreting the behaviors of others. Finally, attitudes have to do with basic beliefs a learner has about people of a different

culture and whether a positive, neutral, or negative disposition exists towards them. Evaluations of intercultural training programs also tend to focus on these

The differences are as follows:

- Intercultural knowledge: research about or exchange of information concerning cultures different from one's own. This results in knowledge about the other culture.
- Intercultural communication skills: recognition of personal value system and preconceptions + added knowledge about other cultures. This results in empathy with the other culture.

It is possible to introduce yet another term into this ever-growing field of interculturality: intercultural awareness. In the field of language teaching (including ESL and EFL), it is becoming more frequent to hear of language teaching and (inter)cultural awareness as being integral to each other. Along these lines, however, this intercultural awareness in language learning is too often seen as yet one more "skill" to be acquired, along with reading, writing, listening and speaking skills; in other words it is fast becoming the "fifth" skill to be learnt in the language classroom. However, as Claire Kramsch (1993) points out, "if language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching". This means that it cannot be extrapolated as an isolated skill from the "whole competence" of a language user.

It also means that understanding a language goes beyond being grammatically and lexically competent in that language. The student must be aware of not only the target language's culture but also be able to see how the target language's culture relates to their own. In order to develop students' intercultural communicative competence, their awareness of cultures (own and others) will help them interpret and understand other languages and cultures. Thus, intercultural communicative skills must be seen as a competency which requires not only knowledge and skills but also attitudes. Quite rightly, Internet, due to its multicultural and multilinguistic nature, has been proclaimed as a significant tool for teaching intercultural competency.

Added to all of this is the increasingly popular movement which champions English as an International Language (EIL); promoting English as an international lingua franca. Still, this position is not without its detractors, notably because of the quite political and imperialistic attitude which can be attached to it. Perhaps a more diplomatic orientation might be positioning English for Intercultural Communication. Placing English as just one of several possible international lingua francas implies a focus on interaction between non-native-speakers who may come from very different language and cultural backgrounds. The objective becomes one of communicating effectively and appropriately, thus bringing us back to the definition of intercultural communication – in this case, using English as the means of communication. This focus shifts the teaching goals from language norms (usually pertaining to native speakers) to a focus on negotiation wherein the speakers must learn to accommodate each other's different levels and backgrounds.

Some goals of such a programme designed to teach is not just language, but also entail the student be able to:

- observe, identify and recognise elements of their own culture and others' cultures
- compare and contrast
- negotiate meaning
- tolerate ambiguity
- effectively interpret messages
- limit the possibility of misinterpretation
- defend one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others' perspectives

- have the ability to accept differences between individuals

Many foreign language teachers first become interested in using multimedia technologies and Internet because of the opportunities provided for language use and “authentic communication”. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that there are different ways of “communicating” through Internet, and not all of them require the same level of intercultural competence and collaboration. According to Judi Harris (April 2004), internet communication projects can be classified according to purpose. Evidently, the purpose of the student task will influence the amount of communication and possible intercultural communication required.

Harris classifies the three types of internet tasks as:

- Independent: This work requires a minimal amount of intercultural or even interpersonal communicative skills. This would include any work which requires browsing or searching for particular information on one’s own, as in research.

- Interdependent: This includes any type of information exchange such as emails or discussion groups. These tasks usually require interpersonal and intercultural skills, according to the way the project or communicative effort is set up.

- Problem-solving: Tasks designed for problem-solving also involve a high level of communication and subsequently will require developing or enhancing interpersonal skills.

These different task purposes must be kept in mind when designing an international collaborative ICT project because the need for intercultural skills is more of a requisite for some tasks than it is for others. Learning intercultural skills can even become a part of the design of the task. Projects involving interpersonal exchange can become sites for bringing together cross-cultural partners for discussion about a wide range of topics, including cultural aspects of different areas of life. Some ideas for designing interpersonal exchange include:

- Key pals
- Global classrooms
- Internationally organized meetings
- “Electronic interviewing” of a personality known by all the partners
- Collaboratively created webquest (partners exchange information to be included in the final version)
- Collaborative writing of an electronic journal

All of these type of projects can facilitate the exchange of ideas amongst students from different cultures. These can be complemented by setting up common databases or electronic publications based on the exchange of information amongst partners. All of these tasks require knowledge and use of intercultural communication and therefore will help the students develop and further their intercultural communication skills.

The third type of Internet use, problem-solving, integrates most fully the use of communicative skills, especially if the problem-solving is done collaboratively. If the project is designed to incorporate global partners, it will necessitate the development and use of intercultural communicative knowledge quite extensively. By involving the students in different areas of problem-solving, they will be required to use communicative skills for many different purposes. To name just a few:

- request and organize information
- deliver and exemplify their knowledge about information requested from them
- clarify and request clarification about information
- analyze and negotiate possible answers

One example of this type of collaborative projects could be information searches wherein each partner has only part of the information necessary to resolve a problem which is in common to all the partners involved. Another example is parallel problem solving wherein each partner works on similar problems and then the students are asked to compare results. These problem-solving projects can be linked to simultaneous discussions as well, whether textually (through keyboard chatting) or audio-video links, thus increasing the use of different intercultural communicative skills even further.

Hopefully, through guided reflection, as students experience linguistic and cultural otherness, they will integrate this into their existing linguistic and cultural understandings. This will lead to greater intercultural awareness and self-awareness as well. Some writers (e.g. Byram 1989, Holliday 1994) feel that reflecting on self-identity as well as other's identity can help students break away from stereotypical beliefs about others. This would be a welcome complement to the intercultural element of a success internationally collaborative ITC project! And it may well be the first step towards a new more egalitarian era of English for Intercultural Communication (EIC), wherein native and non-native speakers alike are all more interculturally aware.

According to J. Willis (1996), an appropriate classroom task is "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome" (p. 53). Willis also suggests that language use in tasks should reflect language use in the outside world. Though, language use in the outside world is quite unclear, and activities and tasks based on structured scenarios tend to miss the nuances and subtleties of meaning negotiation, which is essential to accurate and successful communication. Nunan (1989) similarly states that a task "is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10). As such, according to Nunan, a language learning task is an activity that has a nonlinguistic purpose with a clear outcome and that uses any or all of the four language skills in its completion by conveying meaning in a way that reflects real-world language use.

This approach to language learning and teaching is practical on a local or classroom level. However, the problems that persist center more on what exactly constitutes real-world language use and how meaning can be created or negotiated through a common target language between people of different backgrounds and communication styles in unfamiliar contexts, where even basic common sense, values, and perspectives are in a constant state of change. Acquisition of these skills requires a refocusing of goals and ideas for communicative competence. Shehadeh (2005) claims that "what is needed, therefore, is an approach to L2 [second language] learning and teaching that provides a context that activates language acquisition processes" (p. 14). However, if such contexts are indeed constantly changing and unpredictable, how can they be reproduced in a classroom or structured language learning environment for the purpose of practicing tasks for acquiring real-world skills?

According to Widdowson (1998), learners cannot be prepared in patterns of cultural behavior because these are too unpredictable and cannot be imitated in the classroom. Nevertheless, he also suggests that the classroom context is a community with its own cultural reality, and that this offers a unique environment in which language and culture are not just learned but learned from. Tasks which are more demonstrative of the real world can then be included into the classroom as a methodology that will provide for communicative competence.

As Widdowson states, these tasks should then be systematically linked to the things learners need to do in the real world, incorporate what is known about the nature of successful communication, and embody what is known about second language acquisition.

Similarly, Bygate (1987) suggests that oral interaction tasks in which participants are constantly negotiating meaning, such as an interview or a dinner party, helps learners to practice skills such as evaluation, explanation, justification, and predication, and generally learn how to manage interaction.

On the other hand, Byram (1997) proposes that “learners need to see their role not as imitators of native speakers but as social actors engaging with other social actors in a particular kind of communication and interaction which is different from that between native speakers” (p. 21). Byram’s model proposes that the ultimate goal of language teaching should not be to become a native speaker but an intercultural speaker. In addressing the requirements for an intercultural speaker, Byram establishes a comprehensive model of intercultural communicative competence geared toward developing culture-specific as well as general knowledge and skills for learning about, becoming involved in, and successfully negotiating intercultural communicative interactions.

In some EFL settings, classes consist of students of different cultural backgrounds; in others, classes consist of student with the same culture. In the former case, learning about diverse cultures and developing intercultural awareness are often not new issues—in multicultural classrooms, students learn about each other’s cultures through various activities, and not only during English lessons. Classes of learners with the same cultural backgrounds, on the other hand, do not present a pressing need to raise cross-cultural awareness, so multicultural education is absent from school curricula.

Human-computer interaction of multimedia technology provides an innovative platform for foreign language education. Particularly, assisted by multimedia technologies, case-based teaching is widely being implemented in teaching intercultural communication, which is a new area in English curriculum system. This pedagogy awakens great concern for its effectiveness of theory input and students’ criticality development.

Multimedia technologies play one of the best roles in creating an authentic learning context. It embodies a task-based principle, a widely supported in language learning practice.

Nowadays, multimedia assisted case-based teaching is broadly used in teaching intercultural communication. Different from traditional exemplification, it values the specifically designed task involvement and teacher-student interaction based on learning targets. Besides, it fortifies students’ analyzing abilities, their introspection and critical thoughts that are important evaluating criteria for students in intercultural communication. Therefore, this pedagogy is accepted as the most effective, attractive and desired teaching method in intercultural communication.

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