

# 1. The Impact of Information Technology (IT) on the Language Classroom

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## **Abstract**

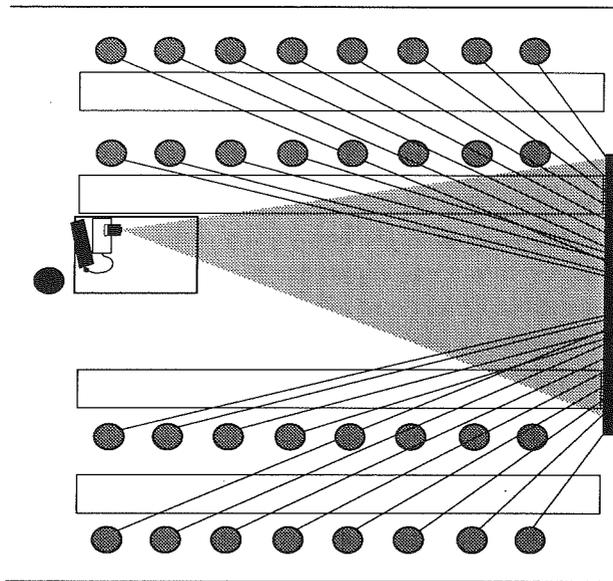
With the advent of information technology, the language class is no longer the only place where linguistic competence can be gained. This evolution parallels and reflects significant changes in the role of the language teacher. IT has and will change the entire learning experience. Learners have always been exposed to the real world only when they left school or university. Access to the Internet can – and will – change that. Web browsers bring the world into the classroom.

**S**trong pressure is being applied these days from way up in the French Education hierarchy to get rank and file teachers to tame and use information technology in their classrooms. Beyond the hype and noise pollution generated by the ministry concerned, it is interesting to assess how IT has really made its way into our classrooms so far, and how it will impact our practice in future.

Few of our numerous IT-reluctant colleagues, eager to lay down resources for their learners to feed upon, realise how helpful a simple Windows-based multimedia environment can be. When starting a multimedia computer several “resources” can be run at the same time. A word-processor, for one, which can be used as an electronic board, or as a tool for building writing strategies; an encyclopedia or dictionary, which can be tapped for cultural background or vocabulary at any time the need arises, but which also allows the teacher to implement reading strategies; a language reservoir, for the learners to use at leisure, to enhance oral competence; hypermedia applications, ideal for teaching, and acquiring, methodology; an Internet browser, which allows access to the various troves of the World Wide Web. All of these resources are available alternatively and instantly at any given time by pressing a key. No chalk, no heavy books, no large maps, no huge, clunky cassette players or disobedient VCRs - look, no sweat.

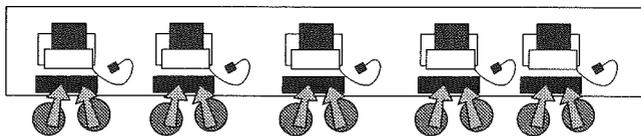
Such delicacies basically come in three ways. The one-computer set-up (*see Fig. 1*) where the teacher is in charge and uses IT with a collective projection system to cater for her/his students’ needs. The computer room set-up (*see Fig. 2*), where the teacher has given the students a task to complete on the computer

fleet available – writing, exercising, etc. Here the teacher's role is limited to handling technical glitches and offering didactic help on specific points as they arise. This set-up is now evolving into the language lab concept, which adds the audio dimension, both in reception and production, and implies a far more important role for the teacher, who can control, establish connections between speakers, get a word in edgeways, etc. Yet another set-up is the resource center, or *espace langues* as the French phrase goes, justifiably connoting freedom of use in a leafy (see Fig. 3), pleasant environment. In this context students are allowed, within their school time and out of their course time, access to multimedia or Internet material on state-of-the-art workstations.

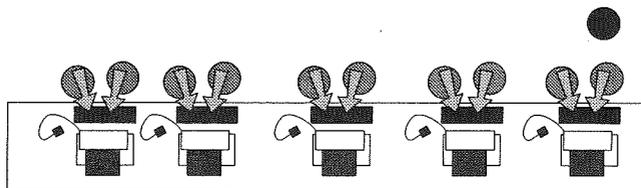


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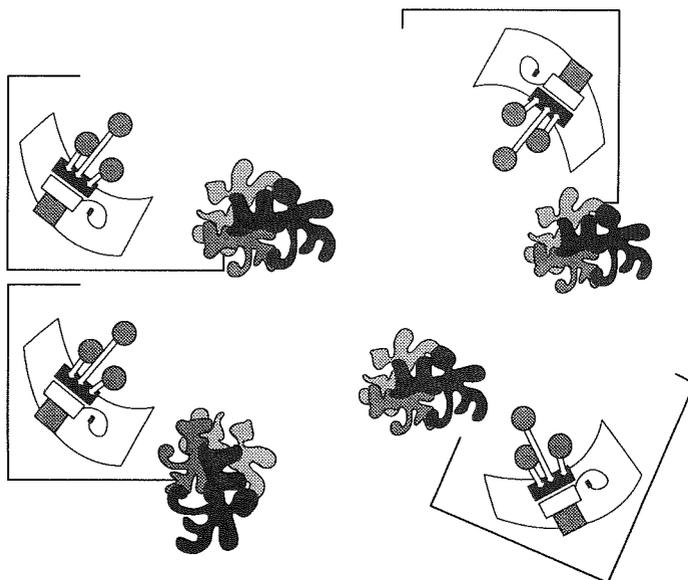
Obviously, the language class is no longer the only place where linguistic competence can be gained. This evolution parallels and reflects significant changes in the role of the language teacher. Because of the extreme variety of, and quick access to, the resources available, teachers can no longer control all the material beforehand. As a result, they may find themselves confronted with the reality of the unknown, sharing it with their students. This requires a delicate mixture of confidence and humility.



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For the same reasons, the teacher is no longer the sole source of knowledge. Take an exposé on, say, Robert Cornier, an American writer of stories for children. Whether at home or in the resource center, through an Internet search engine, the student assigned the task can download a wealth of 15 pages on the subject, of which the teacher may know one third at best. The teacher's role here is no longer to bring in her/his own knowledge, which would be inappropriate, but to teach the student how to sort out relevant details from overabundant data -to process information into usable knowledge.

Last but not least, for the first time in the history of teaching, teachers will be led to expose learners to unmoderated material, i.e. material that has not been produced by any recognised institution, namely, a publisher or educational organisation. This entails that they should either try, when with their students, to always explore "safe" sites – such as CNN, Time or the like – or teach them strategies so that they can explore any site safely, even on their own. One is the journalistic approach, consisting in always checking and cross-referencing the information found, another is the capacity to detect, identify and unmask such dangerous prose as neo-Nazi or revisionist theses, particularly widespread on the Internet.

How learners, who are the target of teaching, experience and will experience IT is another question. For the increasing number of students who have had little opportunity to access intellectual material at home, new technologies are bringing something different. Computer screens are essentially images, often of the animated kind. They allow the teacher to visualise processes that normally take place in the secrecy of the mind. Take for example writing a paragraph. This apparently simple task involves selecting ideas, connecting and ordering them, adding items from various lists of linkwords, adverbs or modifiers available in the memory of the writer. Thanks to such ordinary software as Word, all of these abstract processes can be made concrete on screen in the learning phase, the teacher actually moving words, "handling" text in the most concrete sense of the term. This is a huge advance in teaching such basic, yet refined skills as writing.

Hypermedia technology, in addition to the above dimension, allows for a non-sequential presentation of didactic material. The mind naturally works by associating ideas in a random-type, direct manner. Books cannot emulate this approach because they are constrained by their very nature – a sequential succession of pages. Today, there are no such restraints in, say, a hypermedia

dictionary. You are looking for a word whose meaning is still vague. On the screen devoted to this word, any word that is not understood can be clicked on, opening another article devoted to that word, until another word-related problem is reached, justifying the same investigation, and so forth. You can then “jump back” to the previous “layer”, then back over again to the point where you initiated the search. You can’t do that with a paper dictionary, can you?

Until recently, learning has, most of the time, been contained within the geographic limits of the school. Learners have always been working *in vitro* as it were, to be exposed to the real world only when they left school or university. This was all very theoretical, and many outside bodies, especially companies, justifiably blamed the system for being introverted and having too little contact with reality. Access to the Internet can – and will – change that. Web browsers bring the world into the classroom, or allow the classroom to travel across the world, depending on which browser you use. There is no question that Internet forums allow students to communicate with real people in the real world, forcing them to assess the validity of their written competence. The immediacy of the response is also a factor in this assessment. The ability to access scientific sites across the world, on sometimes extremely advanced subjects, is something absolutely new. Conversely, if comparing the approach of various information sources on the same news items is not exactly new and may be done in theory with the paper press, in practice, the preparation and execution of such a lesson is difficult, time-consuming and above all paper-consuming. With the Internet, it can be done almost instantly, and carried out live while saving paper.

And yet, despite all of these advantages, either proven or potential, IT is still minimally used in the French education system. Drawing from personal experience and involvement in teacher training for some ten years in the field of IT and language teaching, I feel that little, if any, progress has been made in persuading our colleagues to use the computer in the language class. My conservative estimate is that less than 1 percent of teachers of English are actually using IT on a regular basis in their lessons.

One factor of this reluctance is the instinctive mistrust of teachers, who perceive electronic machinery as antithetical to the organic aspect of teaching, and writing, and reading. This is wrong. Said Salman Rushdie, explaining that the Fatwah on his head forced him into ceaseless travelling, and into buying a portable computer to continue his writing: “So, I can actually carry an office around with me. [*The*

*Moor's Sigh*] is the first novel I've ever written on a computer. In my view it's helped me a lot, in spite of all the kinds of sacred cows about worrying about switching to a word processor. In my view it's just allowed me to work a lot more on the text and I certainly, [?] I think it's possibly the most polished piece of writing I've done because I was able to do more polishing because of the removal of the physical act." Besides, it is obvious, from looking at junior high school pupils working on multimedia computers in the library room, that the technology attracts, and therefore induces reading habits in a category of learners that would normally shun such material in paper form. Another factor of reluctance is the fundamental predicament of technology in the educational field: you use it once you feel you can master it, but you can master it only through repeated use. Obviously, large-scale, intensive training is one solution (provided our minister does not lynch our colleagues for such criminal conduct as asking for training).

Another is long-term, cultural evolution. What will happen with IT is, I believe, what has happened with the use of audio, then video technology. Video (i.e. VCRs and video-cassettes) has been around for some twenty years. It took about ten years for the device to get into households on a large scale. It took another five years for teachers – whose households are not necessarily among those quickest to go for it – to sufficiently master the technology to have no qualms about using it in their classroom for, with, and despite the presence of, stress-generating students. And yet for years the VCR had been around in lycées; training courses of all sorts had been implemented, attended with interest, sometimes with enthusiasm. But that did not affect the pace of change. Change occurs eventually, when the time is ripe, when the actors concerned feel comfortable with the change, and only then.

Current IT users should therefore stop making IT non-users feel like dinosaurs; IT non-users should stop feeling guilty. Over the next five years or so, some will get to use the technology, some won't, and thus will be preserved variety, which is also the spice of learning.

That having been said, it should be stressed that such new instruments cannot be ignored, even by those who do not wish to use them in the classroom. Not long ago I was training teachers on the use of video in the language class, and one colleague vehemently stated that she had no TV set at home and intended never to have any. I perfectly understood her position, but, I felt, shared culture is the oil in the cogs of the mysterious teacher-learner machinery. If you and your students enjoy a

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common and cheerful vision of Homer and Bart Simpson, chances are that as learners they will more readily accept any cultural background you may think fit to provide them with, if only because you obviously do not discriminate against their culture.

Now within a few years, computer culture, Internet culture and Internet-speak will be so widespread that it will be difficult to communicate verbally without referring to them, even in fields apparently light-years removed. As Alain Renaud hammered home with obvious pleasure in a recent lecture, the question is no longer whether you accept this or not; it's a fact, it's there, and it's there to stay, there's no getting around it any more.

### **Biodata**

**Bernard Moro**, 50, a French *professeur agrégé* of English, first worked as an illustrator and professional translator in Paris for ten years before becoming a full-fledged teacher in 1980. In 1985, he got involved in teacher training for both IT and general didactics for languages. As such, he was called into the *agrégation interne* jury for four years. He has authored various software applications for the language class and co-authored a method for teaching English to 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> graders, known in France as *Flying Colors*. As a result of his experience in creating pedagogical hypermedia, he was called in as group leader for the Council of Europe workshops, as well as to South-East Asia. Now conducting didactic research on both hypermedia technology and the Internet, he insists his work is first and foremost with his pupils in his small-town Lycée Xavier-Marmier, Pontarlier, Académie de Besançon.