

INTERNET AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL IN THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE: THE CASE OF UKRAINIAN

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The question of using the Internet in a foreign language classroom continues to be a hot topic in scholarship over the last few decades. Several studies stress that Internet technology may serve as a resource that can enrich and expand language instruction and that it has already become a powerful pedagogical tool for learning and teaching a foreign language in an academic setting.

The purpose of this article is to address some prevailing ideas concerning the importance, applicability and implications of Internet usage in a foreign language classroom and to share some practical information about using this medium as a pedagogical tool in a Ukrainian language classroom, when Ukrainian is taught as a foreign language.

Key words: language acquisition, Internet, cultural competence, content-based instruction, learning and teaching Ukrainian.

1. Internet as a Tool in a Foreign Language Classroom

1.1 Internet and Its Importance in a Foreign Language Classroom

The importance of the Internet as a pedagogical tool for learning a foreign language has been widely recognized in scholarship. Its role in foreign language acquisition has been noted, among others, by Bush [5], Warschauer [23], and Lee [14; 12; 13]. Several studies show that Internet activities both reinforce language skills and equip students with an understanding of the target culture [2; 14; 13; 15]. „The Internet not only provides a powerful pedagogical tool but also supports an interactive methodology that truly engages students’ imagination and ingenuity as they communicate with others in the real world” [12: 117].

1.2 Cultural Competence

No longer seen as merely a novelty, it is no wonder that current approaches to second language acquisition constantly stress the importance of the cultural component in a language classroom. Geographical distance from the target culture, as well as a shortage of time devoted to classroom instruction, are of primary concern when faced with the question of incorporating cultural activities, based on authentic materials, into a lesson plan. Resources found on the World Wide Web often offer feasible solutions to these concerns. The Internet is a gateway for instantaneous communication with a target culture. Students can access the Internet resources and use the foreign language to participate in a variety of established practices of the target culture. The Internet provides learners with culturally and linguistically authentic input in the target culture, which leads to the enhancement of cultural awareness, sensitivity, understanding, and deeper knowledge of that culture on the part of a student. The value of

the Internet as an important tool in bridging foreign language learning and acquisition of cultural competence has been stressed widely [17; 18].

1.3 Communicative Competence and Students' Motivation

Language learning stems from communication. Several studies on Computer Mediated Communication that research the impact of new computer media on foreign language education have stressed the improvements in students' communicative competence and positive shifts in students' attitudes toward language learning in general when computer technology is used in the curriculum [2; 3; 14; 12; 1]. The Internet is among the Computer Mediated Communicative Tools that promote students' language communicative skills and foster interest in learning a foreign language.

With respect to communicative competence, the Internet has the ability to provide the users with interactive activities such as e-mail, chat rooms, discussion forums, bulletin boards and the like. „Online interaction promotes students' thinking skills to allow them to focus on 'communication' rather than 'drill' language itself"[13: 128]. In addition, it has been noted, that it is in fact easier for students to cross cultural and language barriers via technological means than in real life situations. Thus, this type of communication is less intimidating, and therefore more motivational.

The information found on the Web is timely, current, and relevant for a particular setting or for specific students' interests. These factors also promote communicative motivation for foreign language learners. Research has shown that, for instance, on-line activities provide a stimulating learning environment, which increases student motivation for further foreign language learning [12: 103] and heightens students' interest in a foreign culture in a dynamic rather than passive way [12: 116].

Students' motivation also increases because of the great variety of resources existent on the Internet. Especially valuable for language teaching is the visual component, that is, various graphics, high quality photographs, billboards, posters, reproductions of paintings, cartoons, up-to-date maps etc. Moreover, the availability of video and sound files allows an instructor (or students) to bring current events, music recordings, and movies into the classroom. Therefore, Internet resources aid in accessing a broad spectrum of materials previously not obtainable, and allow for both receiving of input and producing of output, which is essential for the foreign language learning process.

The Internet offers possibilities for students to participate in real-world type of activities. It provides increased opportunities for students to practice and use the target language in various communicative situations, including outside the classroom. Students' interest is augmented by an access to a myriad of speech situations, including a variety of styles and registers that the Internet offers, which also promotes the acquisition of pragmalinguistic competence. This is a clear departure from the traditional teacher-student communication dominated by teacher's talk or simply work with literary texts.

In general, the multimedia nature of the Internet appeals to today's technologically savvy generation of students. It offers a multi-faceted network of opportunities for students to develop communicative competence in the target language, and to keep motivational factors going.

1.4 Classroom Dynamics

The use of the Internet shifts the dynamics in the language classroom. It creates a move from the traditional teacher-oriented to a student-oriented classroom, promoting student-centered approach to learning a foreign language. This concept goes hand in hand with the communicative approach to language teaching, in which „[i]t is no longer the instructor who, as an expert, transmits knowledge to the learner who is considered an ‘empty vessel’ waiting to be filled... Now the learner is at the center, he or she has to take on a more active role in the language learning process and is provided with certain strategies and gambits by the instructor in order to do so. Instructors are no longer the sole providers of information... [they] take on the role of ‘architects’ and ‘resource persons’ ” [9: 310]. The role of the instructor has shifted from top-down conductor of instruction to one of a facilitator, active listener, and challenger. Students „receive input through on-line readings and produce output via the Computer Mediated Communication in the target language [11; cited in 12: 103] in a form of e-mail or chat, or via communicative activities in the classroom. Therefore, an important element of using the Internet is the encouragement of autonomous learning among students and fostering the use of language beyond the classroom.

In addition, with respect to classroom dynamics, Internet activities promote non-linear, co-operative learning, encouraging collaboration among students. This collaboration consists of exchanges about language, culture and technology, and exists in both classroom and outside-of-classroom settings [6; 17; 7].

1.5 Types of Activities using Internet Resources

The incorporation of Internet resources into the classroom curriculum may involve several types of activities. Specifically, it may be incorporated as a part of classroom instruction with the use of projection facilities so the entire class is able to consult a Web resource together, be it printed, graphic, video or sound text. Students may also be given a task to work on Internet resources as part of their homework (see examples of students’ projects below). And last, but not least, the Internet may be used for assessment¹.

1.6 Four Language Skills

The philosophy of foreign language teaching, in recent decades, has progressed from focusing on reading and writing skills to stressing the development of students’ ability to speak and to understand spoken language. The premise of foreign language education became that the essence of language learning is communication, which is based on acquiring all four language skills: reading and listening, which are the receptive skills, and speaking and writing, the productive skills. The Internet offers tools for teaching and learning of all four skills.

¹ In one of my advanced Ukrainian language classes, in students’ course evaluations, most students noted that the best test they had in the course was one where they were required to use the Internet. Specifically, students were tested on their ability to describe a Ukrainian music group or a musician, using constructions given to them in previous lessons. During the test, students were given a task first to research various Ukrainian music sites, second, provide a description of one music group or a musician, and third, explain their choice for description. This type of test, although challenging, was successful for accessing students’ particular knowledge while, at the same time, diminishing the students’ stress level and anxiety of the test.

Materials for reading can be found on the Web on nearly any conceivable topic. Listening skills may be targeted through viewing various news broadcasts or television programs, as well as listening to radio reports by various radio stations around the globe relevant to a particular cultural context. The opportunity for students to communicate with representatives of the target culture is there via discussion forums, chat rooms, e-mail and bulletin boards. The reinforcement of speaking skills may also take place in the form of class discussions, following activities involving the Web. With respect to writing skills, students produce texts based on their reading and comprehension of authentic materials from the authentic sources on the Web.

1.7 Content-Based Approach to Language Learning and the Use of Internet

As stated in the foregoing, the emphasis in second language learning has shifted from a traditional, focus on language itself, approach to a communicatively based approach, in which it is essential for a learner to acquire both linguistic and cultural competence. A content-based approach promotes this principle in combining the study of the subject matter with learning of the language itself [21]. According to Stryker and Leaver [21], content-based instruction „consists of three characteristics – subject-matter core, use of authentic materials, and appropriateness of the materials to the needs of specific learners” [cited in 13: 128]. The discussion above with respect to Internet resources and their potential of being used in the classroom curriculum allows for the drawing of corollaries between the principles of content-based instruction and the characteristics of the Internet. Specifically, the ability of the Internet to provide core texts from authentic settings and the possibility of tailoring specific tasks for the needs of specific learners indicated that implementation of this technological medium has great potential for increased performance in a foreign language classroom. With respect to specifically content-based instruction, previous research has shown that this approach is an effective method to develop students’ language competence, cultural literacy, cognitive thinking skills, motivation, self-confidence and their ability to interact with native speakers in real-life situations [8; 19; 20]. The balancing of the content-based instruction with the use of Internet resources, as some studies show [22; 13; 11; 16], „proves to be an effective and vital tool in achieving the goal of empowering students to become autonomous learners and well-rounded individuals” [13: 139). Therefore, Internet resources may assist in the learning of a foreign language when the use of such tools is supported by appropriate theories of learning and careful orchestration of the curriculum.

In the following section, I would like to communicate a spirit of information-sharing and to show how concrete examples involving the resources found on the Web can impact on the teaching and learning of foreign language and culture, in this case Ukrainian.

2. Language Activities for Different Levels of Language Proficiency: the Case of Ukrainian

2.1 Some Pedagogical Considerations In Planning Language Activities

As noted above, the plethora of authentic material and the variety of communicative situations offered by the Internet provides students with an opportunity to immerse themselves in a target culture. In order to make this immersion a success, careful and effective

planning and organization, as well as presentation and preparation of that information are paramount. The activity planning considerations and the decisions on whether and how to use the material must be based on a clear pedagogical agenda with clearly set out language learning objectives. Thus, the foundational principles of pedagogical objectives should guide the actual implementation of tasks using technological devices.

First and foremost, the decision of having students do Internet-based activities should be based on a clear rationale that justifies its use [4: 97]. In addition, the instructor should prescreen and preselect a set of Internet materials to ensure its contents are appropriate for their pedagogical goals of a specific curriculum. Moreover, „the authentic materials must meet the students’ proficiency levels so that they are not overwhelmed” [13: 139]. In pre-screening and selecting Internet resources for specific language assignments, „instructors need to pay special attention to the linguistic complexity and cognitive processes involved in processing the instructional materials... [T]hrough a clearly focused task design and carefully chosen sites, the instructor can control the navigational scope that helps the learners from getting lost or overwhelmed” [4: 93]. Importantly, students should be guided to ensure their success in coping with working in the target language and in the context of the target culture. And last, but not least, a systematic assessment procedure ought to be established to ensure the quality of work structured around content-based instruction while using resources from the Internet.

2.2 Specific Activities for Different Levels of Language Proficiency

To demonstrate how the Internet could be an important learning and teaching tool in a task- and content-based teaching environment, I would like to offer a few examples of language activities that stem from the use of this technological medium. One common example of current web activities for language acquisition is to „plan a trip” to a country or city using travel resources such as hotel advertisements, restaurant menus and reviews, and transportation schedules of the target country, found on the Internet. Another popular activity is visiting historical sites, museums and cultural events by researching resources on the Internet that deal with tourism. The topic of food and cuisine is another one that is covered extensively on Web pages.

Even though it may seem necessary that students possess at least an intermediate, or preferably an advanced level of knowledge of the target language, in order to utilize Internet resources from the target culture, the medium can nevertheless be used even in the beginning level curriculum. In my own teaching, specifically when designing language activities for different levels of language proficiency, I follow the ACTFL guidelines (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages). Briefly, at the *novice level*, which roughly corresponds to the beginning level, students’ language proficiency is minimal: language production consists of lists of words, phrases, progressing to minimal sentences that are learned rather than personalized. With respect to connected discourse, a learner begins to produce some simple descriptions; however, not in a form of a connected discourse. The *intermediate level* is characterized by the ability to create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements; initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic language tasks; and ask and answer questions. At this level a learner begins to produce connected discourse,

particularly for simple narration and/or description. The *advanced level* is characterized by the speaker's ability to use language in a clearly participatory fashion; initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of linguistic tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events; narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse; and there is an emerging evidence of ability to compare and support opinions, as well as hypothesize¹.

Keeping these guidelines in mind, I will illustrate how a particular topic, 'food' in this case, can be adapted easily to multiple levels of language proficiency.

Tasks for a beginner level could be the following:

Students are provided with a list of possible sites to visit and are asked to look for advertisements for various food items sold in Ukraine. They are asked to list the names and organize the food items into categories. Students may also collect information on store names, in which particular food items can be purchased (note that here students will notice some cultural differences: supermarkets vs. specialized grocery stores, or supermarkets in Ukraine vs. supermarkets in students' home country). These activities may be conducted either individually or in groups. By pursuing this type of activity, students have a chance to gain a visually enhanced practice of everyday vocabulary. For such types of activities, students may be allowed to have a choice of a Ukrainian and/or an English interface. The English interface should not be seen as a hindrance to Ukrainian instruction, but rather as a quick reference, a ready-make translation tool, which facilitates reading comprehension.

Tasks for an intermediate level could be the following:

Students are assigned a budget with the request that they plan a weeklong stay in a specific Ukrainian city. They are asked to search for stores where they can do their shopping and can buy a variety of grocery items. Based on the information gathered, students prepare their plans for grocery shopping, demonstrating among other things when and where a specific item will be purchased, its quantity and price, their personal preferences, meal arrangements and the like.

Tasks for an advanced level could be the following:

Students may be challenged with a narrative situation, which asks them to describe, in the form of an essay and/or oral class presentation, their imaginary visit to a city/town in Ukraine, concentrating on the question of food/nutrition. Questions such as food types found, brand names, prices, nutritional information, as well as questions of eating habits, dieting and the like may be suggested. Students may also be asked to prepare a comparison between food preferences, cuisine in general and table manners of Ukrainians in Ukraine and those in their own culture(s). Students are also asked to express and support their own opinion about the information they find and can be asked to prepare questions for class discussion.

Other ideas that could be incorporated into various levels of language proficiency:

Beginner's level: Gathering vocabulary lists and creating simple descriptions based on restaurant menus and daily specials, apartment advertisements, personal advertisements or horoscopes (descriptions of people and their characteristics);

¹ Detailed information on the ACTFL guidelines may be found at: <http://www.sil.org/lingualinks/languagelearning/OtherResources/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines/contents.htm>

Intermediate level: Descriptions of a theater repertoire or nightlife in a particular city/country; readings and analyses of job advertisements or television programs. While working with maps or transportation schedules, students could produce simple narrations of their past or future trips, or, based on the information about ‘nightlife’, they could narrate their perfect or worst night out in a foreign city;

Advanced level: At this level of proficiency students may be asked to describe and narrate first, and then create comparisons of various aspects they choose to or are assigned to research on the Internet with respect to the target culture vs. their own, supporting their comparisons with their personal opinions. This may be applied practically to any topic imaginable, beginning with food and ending with politics. At this level, students may be asked to explore, for instance, the history of a particular city through street names or the names of metro-stations (this will allow students to learn about important personages and places in Ukrainian history).

2.3 Grammatical Elements as a Part of Internet Activities

In addition to providing cultural information, thus aiding students in gaining cultural competence, issues of linguistic form are not eliminated but are instead subsumed within a meaningful context. In fact, „Internet assignments can be used to reinforce the study of specific grammatical constructions” [10: 102]. With respect to Ukrainian, the study of advertisements is a great terrain for exploring imperatives. Various sites related to travel would aid in the study of verbs of motion. Finding texts such as a company’s yearly statement could reinforce the study of the perfective aspect. Price lists, opinion polls or other statistical documents are excellent in demonstrating numerals. Abundant schedules or TV guides may be very helpful while working with expressions of time. Therefore, carefully planned Internet activities are not simply entertaining, but educational.

These are just a few samples of how Internet resources could be utilized in a language curriculum at different levels of student proficiency. Even though the quantity and quality of language resources vary depending on the level of instruction, advanced level students, and especially those in content-based courses, are at a vantage point from which there is ample opportunity to delve deeper into the target culture. For this reason, I will offer some insights on activities, which are possible in a content-based course, at an advanced level of language proficiency, „Business Ukrainian”.

2.4 Business Ukrainian: An Advanced Level Content-Based Course

The curriculum in this particular course is content- and task- based. The objectives of this course consist in developing a rudimentary working knowledge of the language for the purpose of business and professional contacts in Ukraine, as well as to broaden the students’ cultural understanding of the contemporary Ukrainian business/professional world. Course activities are structured around typical situations that a Canadian business and professional person may encounter in Ukraine. The selection of topics depends primarily on students’ interests and includes: the economy; trade and advertising; cooperation in politics, business, medicine and the humanities; Ukrainian documents and forms; business and professional etiquette.

There are no textbooks that could be used for such a course in the North American environment; thus, it is an area in which the Internet could and needs to be integrated effectively.

Among various class activities that involved the use of the Internet, live broadcasts were frequently used and brought Ukrainian current economic events alive in the classroom. These were prepared by the instructor and were used for short, warm-up type, class discussions. In addition, several homework assignments involved students' work with the Internet. For instance, for one assignment students were asked to research fifteen Ukrainian banks (sites were given to students in advance). Students were asked to survey various services that banks provide and to choose one bank, which is the most suitable for their own personal needs. Moreover, students were instructed to substantiate their choice and explain their preferences, discussing the pros and cons of various banks. This assignment was followed further by a comparison of Ukrainian and Canadian banking systems. In another assignment that involved the Internet, students were virtually „buying” houses/apartments in Ukraine, practicing in the formalities and paperwork associated with purchasing or leasing, obtaining a loan and arranging for utilities. After students finished their home research on these topics, these questions were discussed in class.

A major part of the course was devoted to students' cultural projects related to business and professional life in Ukraine. It has been noted in scholarship that „...independent projects based on Internet resources are an excellent way to enable students to pursue their own interests and contribute cultural information to course content” [10]. In my course, the choice of topics was entirely up to the students, stemming from their personal and professional interests. Students were encouraged to primarily consult Internet resources, since in Ukrainian; these are the most readily accessible and available materials in the North American setting. Cultural projects were both presented in class and submitted in written form or in a PowerPoint format.

In this course, students produced an interesting diversity of topics that relate to Ukrainian business and economic life: gas industry, auto industry, real estate, social advertisements, music show-business, wine and beer industry, stock markets, tourism, foreign trade, the banking system, mortgages and loans, financial security of youths and other interesting issues.

As Brandl noted, „[p]roject-oriented work embraces principles of ... communicative language learning ... Students apply their knowledge in real-life situations by exploring authentic materials. The learning activities resemble real-world tasks. The students strive for an end product, whose goal they accomplish by collaborating with their peers in order to ultimately share what they have achieved with others” [4: 95]. With respect to projects and their presentations in this particular course, students' independent work with authentic sources, their application of knowledge in real-life situations, their plethora of materials obtained from the Web proved to be a definite enhancement of course curriculum. Moreover, the gathered information was timely, easily obtainable, and free of cost to the student. The incorporation of multi-media accompaniment, be it PowerPoint demonstrations, video-files downloaded from the Net, and interesting graphics projected to the entire class, elicited much enthusiasm on the part of both the presenters and their audience. It also stimulated a great

deal of interest and encouraged collaboration among students. It proved to be motivating, stimulating, challenging and empowering. The variety of multi-media elements allowed for the creation of an environment that makes learning fun, engaging, and most importantly, productive. Project work contributed to students' improvement of language skills, their cultural understanding, and their content learning.

I would like to note here that the type of class described above did in fact create a new social dynamic in the classroom, as was discussed in the foregoing. Students were no longer passive learners; they became quite independent of the instructor. In this scenario, students were encouraged to teach themselves. „By taking a major role in planning and negotiating course content, the students [became] active contributors to their language learning rather than being passive recipients of knowledge” [4: 95]. The role of an instructor and a student, thus, changed: the student became an instructor, while the instructor's role transformed from a top-down teacher to that of a guide, a listener, a facilitator, a helper, and a challenger.

3. Benefits of Incorporating the Internet Resources into a Foreign Language Curriculum: Summary

The use of Internet resources, if carefully planned, is consistent with principles of communicative and content-based approaches to language acquisition. The Internet is a significant contribution to skills-oriented instruction, when integrated into a course. A multitude of teaching resources provides the instructor with opportunities to personalize instruction with respect to students' interests and needs. Using the Internet as a pedagogical tool encourages student-centered, task-oriented activities that foster communication and use of the language while interacting with authentic documents, other students, and even native speakers. This, in turn, creates an engagement in meaningful socio-cultural exchanges in an authentic context. An engagement with the Internet creates a nuanced cultural context for the students, one in which they become active participants. By entering into the specific foreign culture, students acquire a great deal of cultural knowledge and delve into a type of 'immersion'.¹ An increase in cultural understanding results in greater confidence on the part of the learner and a deeper appreciation for the target culture. As students tailor assignments to their particular interests, they pursue topics that intrigue them personally, which, in turn, stimulate interest and self-motivation. The learning process (and indeed its teaching) becomes fun and productive as it occurs in real-world kind of activities. By researching their own topics, students even acquire knowledge not associated directly with the course. Another important issue is that easy access to Internet-resources provides a powerful incentive for students to use and learn the language. Moreover, we all know that students have different learning styles. Internet activities allow students to learn at their own pace, avoiding pressure from either the instructor or their peers.

¹ With respect to 'immersion', I would like to add here that similar principles that I discussed above with respect to using Internet resources, I apply in my summer travel course, taught in L'viv, Ukraine. Specifically, content-based instruction with the goal of enhancing students' cultural competence through, in this case, not Internet, but the surrounding authentic materials (bank brochures, grocery store advertisements, restaurant menus, night club posters etc.) form the core of the learning process.

Significantly, in today's foreign language classroom, it is often the case that students who enroll are from a wide variety of disciplines, majoring in areas not directly linked to languages such as business, sciences, economics, law, medicine etc. These students need significant intercultural understanding specifically related to their future professional life. The implementation of the approaches discussed above shows considerable potential in helping students to achieve language competence as well as gain cultural knowledge on specific topics.

All in all, I am confident that the Internet is a major new media tool for the learning of language and culture. A careful orchestration of the curriculum, planned decisions as to what materials to use, and their effective integration, are the keys to success.

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ІНТЕРНЕТ ЯК ПЕДАГОГІЧНИЙ ЗАСІБ ПРИ ОВОЛОДІННІ МОВОЮ ТА НАБУТТІ МОВНОЇ КОМПЕТЕНЦІЇ: НА ПРИКЛАДІ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ МОВИ

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Використання Інтернету на заняттях з іноземної мови є нагальним питанням в науці вже протягом декількох останніх десятиліть. Декілька досліджень наголошують, що Інтернет-технології можуть слугувати джерелом, що дає можливість збагатити та розширити викладання мови та вже став потужним педагогічним знаряддям вивчення та викладання в академічному середовищі.

Метою цієї статті є звернення до деяких поширених ідей щодо можливості застосування Інтернету на заняттях з іноземної мови, а також обмін деякими практичними знаннями щодо використання цього засобу як педагогічного знаряддя на заняттях з української мови як іноземної.

Ключові слова: оволодіння мовою, Інтернет, мовна компетенція, навчання на основі контексту, вивчення та викладання української мови.