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Socio-Cultural Effects of Integrating Multimedia into the General English Curriculum: Some Observations

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Abstract

EduSoft, together with the Hebrew Herzlia Gymnasium, has delivered a computerized English learning center which includes multimedia English language learning courseware on CD-ROM. In this paper, we will discuss some of the socio-cultural effects of implementing such a multimedia classroom as part of the general English curriculum. Through observations and interviews, we have detailed the impact on students and also on teachers of implementing a multimedia English Center into the general English curriculum of one Tel Aviv junior high and high school.

Keywords

multimedia, English, language learning, CALL

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we will discuss some of the socio-cultural effects of implementing a multimedia classroom as part of the general English curriculum. We will detail the impact on students and also on teachers of implementing such a center at one Tel Aviv junior high and high school. Prior to the opening of the Center in November 1993, the school was equipped with a language laboratory. The Center introduced multimedia computers into the curriculum, along with other teaching and learning aids such as tape players, a variety of reading materials, games, and a video room.

The advantages in the literature to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) are that (Brown, 1994; Jones, 1987):
- learning is more learner-centered;
- heterogeneous classes may be taught more efficiently;
- the problems of specific students may be addressed;

- computer assisted instruction allows for immediate feedback;
- multimedia courseware affords a multisensory learning experience;
- cooperative learning--a skill needed in the workplace and not normally addressed in computer-based training--is possible; and
- students' self-concept and attitudes towards learning are improved.

There is, of course, a by-product of using CALL in EFL classrooms: the familiarization of students with Information Technology.

Interviews with students and teachers have shown that many of the effects detailed in the literature occurred. For example, students and teachers were exposed to the technology of PC hardware and software, causing an increase in computer literacy. Because of the room's design, frontal teaching is discouraged and there has been a shift to learner-centered activities. However, there have also been unanticipated effects. The initiative shown by teachers--some of whom have been teaching for 30 years and were unfamiliar with a standard keyboard--to continue learning about the technology was surprising. Fifty percent of the English teachers have signed up for school-sponsored Windows or Word courses.
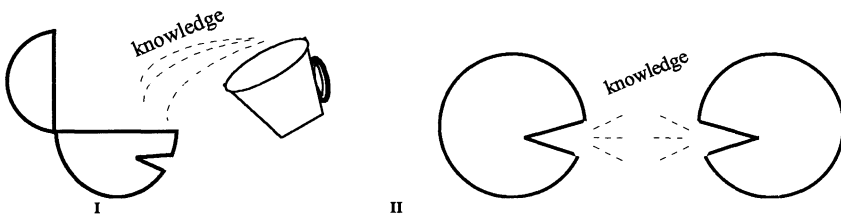
The English teaching community in Israel has long since recognized that Model II, above, is the more relevant one for teaching and learning English.

Since the Hebrew Herzlia Gymnasium, a junior high and high school in Tel Aviv, combined forces with EduSoft, Ltd. to replace an old-fashioned audio language lab with a Computerized Language Center (CLC) for English almost three years ago, the second model has been seen in action. The technology does not isolate students; they communicate with each other about the technology and about the content of the programs. Thus, the dialogue is between teacher and student, as well as student and student.
As mentioned above, observations have shown that the benefits detailed in the literature have occurred at the Gymnasium's CLC.

2   IMPACT ON STUDENTS

The student population at the Gymnasium is composed of approximately 1700 pupils from grades 7 through 12. Feeder schools for the junior high are located in both northern and southern neighborhoods of Tel Aviv; students are bussed in from these

areas and also come from the neighborhood where the high school is located. These students come from widely varying socio-economic backgrounds. After the 9th grade, students are selected on the basis of academic achievement. The CLC is used by all students at the Gymnasium, including non-academic streams and special education.

The benefits of the feedback in the CALL programs are clear. Students call out to show fellow students and teachers, "Look! I got an 80!" And if they don't get a score they feel is satisfactory, they may try again. Their sense of achievement is obvious.

Because there is an element of choice, both within specific programs and also in the decision of how to operate within the CLC, there has been an increase in motivation. For some students, particularly those from the southern neighborhoods, this is their first contact with the technology. They use state-of-the-art multimedia computers for English language learning: *English Discoveries*, dedicated multimedia English learning software; dedicated non-multimedia software from the various sources, including the Center for Educational Technology's *English for You* and *Into Reading*; authoring software where teachers input their own material; and utility software such as the word processor. The room was designed to be aesthetic as well as functional, with an attractive color scheme, carpeting, and specially designed furniture. There are rules and regulations, and the students sign a contract acknowledging their responsibilities. The students feel respected and trusted, thus partners in the educational endeavor.

Although the focus of lessons in the CLC is English, students are also learning skills which will serve them in the workplace. For example, one teacher used the "wizard" function of the word processor to reinforce the writing of formal letters. The twelfth grade students found this lesson fascinating and requested more. The interface is all in English; the teacher feels that students are learning not only in English about a subject for their matriculation exam but they are also learning about navigation protocols as well as about concepts important to how they will view and use technology in the future.

3   IMPACT ON TEACHERS

Teacher training was an integral part of the implementation of the CLC. The first year, starting in October, the teachers had monthly workshops. The teachers at that point could be divided into three groups: techno-willing, those familiar with the concepts and willing to learn; techno-indifferent, those who weren't sure if the effort was worth the results; and techno-phobic. Today, while no teachers have turned into computer hackers, many of them are taking courses to advance their knowledge and are using computers outside the CLC for preparation of tests and assignments.

We started with basic computer literacy for the approximately twenty teachers, but didn't anticipate the lack of keyboarding skills such as the typing of capital letters or punctuation marks. We also did not foresee the trouble the teachers would have in navigating the DOS and Windows menu. They mastered the operation of certain

programs such as *English Discoveries* quite quickly but it was difficult for them to understand the logic of Windows. Another skill we tried to impart to the teachers was the capacity to rely on the help of their students, some of whom are very proficient in the technology. Today the teachers are comfortable in the CLC. The computer-proficient students help other students as well as the teachers. The preparation of materials, which had usually been a team effort, has now extended to creating computer-based materials. Teachers share the authoring exercises they generate as well as lesson plans for using the vast variety of programs available. The teachers' conception of the potential of CALL has also changed. At the beginning, the focus was on the grammar topics and the amount of drilling the programs offered. Now, teachers also recognize the value of word processing and games. They have internalized the fact that if the content of the software is tied to what is being taught in class, programs can be more than just enrichment. The English Coordinator has also noticed a backwash effect to teaching in the classroom; she feels the teaching is less teacher-focused and more learner-centered.

4   CONCLUSION

The findings presented here were drawn from observations and interviews. In order to support the anecdotal evidence of the positive socio-cultural effects of integrating multimedia into the English curriculum, we recommend empirical studies be undertaken. Areas of interest for further study include the effect on individual students correlated to their socio-economic status, the effects on the teaching population, and the effect on the school culture.

5   REFERENCES

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6   BIOGRAPHY

Lauren Goldenberg works at EduSoft in the area of curriculum development for interactive multimedia English language learning projects. She has worked on projects with teachers in Europe and Latin America, Asia and, of course, Israel. Her background is in English language teaching; prior to working at EduSoft she taught high school and adults. Lauren holds an M.A. in TESOL from Teacher's College, Columbia University.