THE USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN TEFL

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Rezumat: *Articolul subliniază rolul utilizării tehnologiilor informaţionale în predarea englezei ca limbă străină. Se discută diferite abordări şi tehnici care pot ajuta studenţii de limba engleză să-şi îmbunătăţească abilităţile lingvistice prin utilizarea tehnologiilor informaţionale. Printre aceste tehnici se numără dicţionare electronice, site-uri web online de învăţare a limbii engleze, jocuri online de învăţare a limbilor străine, lecţii video, bloguri. De asemenea, sunt prezentate strategii de utilizare eficientă a acestora, avantajele utilizării lor şi provocările care pot apărea în procesul de studiu.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *predarea limbii engleze ca limbă străină, tehnologii informaţionale, învăţarea limbii asistată de computer (IAC), instrumente, resurse, materiale de studiu.*

1. Literature review

Nowadays, IT (information technologies) are so widely used that it is difficult to imagine life without them. A large part of the planet's population is represented by active internet users. Information and socialization seem to be practiced more and more through the internet. Even people who are not familiar with it face situations in which they have to deal with its challenges. In the last two decades, the internet has taken the lead in many areas of our lives. As a result, the use of IT has become a mandatory requirement in almost all areas of human activity. Bruce and Hogan (1998) noticed how easily an innovative and useful tool can become an indispensable component of our lives: "As technologies embed themselves in everyday discourse and activity, a curious thing happens. The more we look, the more they slip into the background. Despite our attention, we lose sight of the way they give shape to our daily lives" (p. 270). Undoubtedly, human activity was possible before the advent of technologies. But what was a luxury in the beginning has easily become a habit. The computer has transformed, in a very short time, from an innovative tool into an imperative. It is hard to believe that there are people who have not seen a computer in their lives. One of the target areas of technology influence is the field of education. For certain, technologies have a great potential for being used in education. IT is gradually penetrating educational institutions. More and more schools are using computers, projectors or telephones during the foreign language class. For some time students, as well as teachers have been accustomed to looking for information, work tools and study materials on the internet and to harness various online tools to make the study process in the classroom more efficient and more interactive. It is difficult for us to imagine the process of studying a language without watching movies, listening to music in the target language or, at least, listening to the speech of the native speakers of the target language. The world is constantly changing, always looking for ways to progress. Nowadays, when talking about progress we most often refer to the technological progress. It is obvious that educational requi-

rements change along with the development of technologies. Knowing this, the question arises "When were technologies first used as a language learning tool?".

The idea of using information technologies in education has its roots in the last century, when the first language laboratories were created.

The traditional language laboratory was comprised of a series of booths, each providing a cassette deck, and accompanying microphone and headphone. Teachers monitored their students' interactions by using a central control panel. The basic premise behind this technology was that if verbal behavior was modelled, and then reinforced, students would quickly learn the language in question. The language lab activities were therefore grounded in a stimulus-response behavior pattern (Singhal, 1997).

It was considered that the more learners would practice such an exercise, the faster they would learn the target language. This method was not very effective, because it bored the students in a fairly short time. It did not help learners to speak and produce their own statements. Another cause of the inefficiency of this method was the poor-quality equipment. With the failure of the method, the need was felt to replace it with a more efficient method and to use the communicative approach. CALL (computer-assisted language learning) proved to be a method that meets those requirements. This method of learning was much more effective and it aroused the learners' interest and motivation. So far CALL has developed a lot and is widely used. Microcomputers and quality CALL software combine a wide range of possibilities for drilling, listening and practicing the target language. CALL seems to bring good results, so it keeps students interested and motivated, offers a wide range of tasks for practice and is a very individualized way of learning. Even though the results that students get due to CALL are good, it is still subject to a lot of criticism. Many critics say that the exercises that are designed online aim to form and develop a single limited skill, which is difficult to apply in practice due to the lack of other skills. If we talk, for example, about the exercises in which gaps must be filled, we cannot talk about practicing the language. Students focus on the missing word or on a grammar rule that helps them to find the correct form of the word, but not on the context. However, used in conjunction with other methods, this is a good exercise. Despite the criticism, the effectiveness of the CALL method is demonstrated by the good results of the students and it is still used.

Through practice, people have understood that the methods of studying languages that include the use of information technologies are the most efficient ones. This is why many people increasingly use online language courses, and teachers' blogs are becoming more and more popular.

For some time, in the context of the pandemic, learning has become impossible without a computer and internet connection. The majority of educational institutions in the world carry out their study process online. Teachers, regardless of their background, must adapt to the new conditions and imperatives of the pandemic. Students are also put in a situation where they have to adapt to focusing on a screen instead of focusing on the blackboard. Using e-mail and the zoom platform is just the least of the challenges. The teacher must also think about the efficiency of the methods used and the involvement of all students in the study process, about tasks

that are more difficult to accomplish online than in classroom lessons and which make a greater appeal to the teacher's ability to adapt and to be flexible.

English is the most widely spoken language internationally. For this reason, there is a wide range of English language teaching/learning materials online. There are currently countless opportunities to use IT in English language teaching and learning. Son (2011) proposes 12 categories of online tools and resources that can be used in the foreign language lesson:

1. learning/content management systems;
2. communication tools;
3. live and virtual worlds;
4. social networking and bookmarking tools;
5. blogs & wikis;
6. presentation tools;
7. resource sharing tools;
8. Web site creation tools;
9. Web exercise creation tools;
10. Web search engines;
11. dictionaries & concordances;
12. utilities.

Every teacher who has had online lessons has used at least some of the tools on this list and surely everyone would find new tools here that they did not know about or have not been able to use yet. The possibilities of their exploitation are infinite. LMS (Learning Management Systems) and CMS (Content Management Systems) such as moodle, edmodo or the increasingly used google classroom serve as learning resources for most schools that operate online, so it is important that their basic functions are known. Among the communicative tools are e-mail, web conferences, or other online socialization tools such as Flowdock and slack, in which messages can be sent, groups created or materials distributed; or as Asana or Dapulse, in which it is possible even to offer and perform tasks. By using communication tools, virtual worlds and social networks, teachers can stimulate students' interest and give them the opportunity and encouragement to practice English not only during the classes, but also after classes. Web search engines and presentation tools are irreplaceable for the first part of the lesson when the teacher has to present the topic. Dictionaries and concordances can serve as linguistic reference tools, while blogs and wikis as an accessible and useful source of information and motivation. Teachers can use web exercise creation tools such as LearnHip, web site creation tools and other utilities to make interactive lessons, to increase the learners' interest and to involve all students in activities. Currently, there is a huge variety of computer applications available, including spell checkers, electronic workbooks, English language courses, writing and reading programs, video lessons, and various resources that stimulate teacher's and learners' creativity and can help to create any type of tasks for the practical part of the lesson. The teacher can operate with these resources both to create individual tasks and tasks in pairs or groups. Moreover, the teacher can use these tools to organize the lesson, and can also urge students to access these resources. By giving stu-

dents the idea to learn through these tools and the urge to use some online resources, the teacher would not only be able to organize successful lessons, but would also encourage continuous learning. When students use language learning applications or follow some blogs, they will not forget about them even when the English lesson is over. They will find them every time they open the phone or spend time on social networks and will always learn something new from there without intentionally accessing them. It is important for the teacher to be up to date with all the innovations in the field of teaching and to be aware of the new and interactive teaching methods with the help of information technologies for both online and classroom lessons.

Stockwell (2009) proposes some strategies for teachers who are required to learn about CALL. He recommends to "seek sources of information"; "critically examine the environment"; "keep up with technological developments"; "set and adhere to learning goals;" and "track your progress" (pp. 101-102).
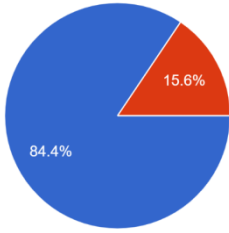
2. Methodology

In order to estimate the impact of information technologies on students at the lessons of English and to determine the efficiency of working with the computer at the lessons, we conducted a survey. The survey was answered by 45 students, aged between 16 and 43, who studied English online for 2 months. Based on the answers, we understood that the answers vary from person to person and age is not relevant. Therefore, we cannot make a statistic of the answers according to the age criterion, as students' choices depend on personal perceptions, preferences and abilities and not on their age.

3. Results and discussion

The study revealed that for most students (40 students out of 45) it is much easier to work with the printed book than with the e-book. Below is the diagram of the percentage of students, in red being represented the percentage of students who prefer to work with the printed book, and in blue - of those who prefer to work with the electronic book.
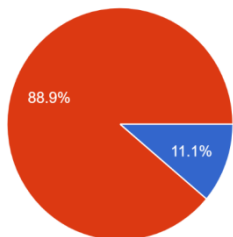
Another aspect that we decided to include in this questionnaire was the efficiency of video and audio materials. These materials are necessary for students to observe how the target language is used by the natives in concrete situations. We found out that the video and audio materials attract attention and help to keep the concentration only in the case of 38 students. 7 students do not always manage to focus or they can easily distract themselves from them. It is curious to know that learning through games works for the same students for whom learning with video and audio materials is efficient. Attached below is the diagram in which the red portion is represented by the percentage of students for whom learning through play and with the help of video and audio materials is effective, and the blue one - by those whom they do not always help to stay focused at the lesson.

When asked if they get bored at least once during online classes, 16 students answered 'yes' and 29 of them said 'no'. This may have happened due to the fact that it is impossible to maintain your concentration for two hours. Moreover, students, being at home with their families and not in an academic environment, can sometimes be distracted from lessons with some household things. Below is the diagram showing the students' answers, where the blue portion represents the percentage of students who got bored, and the red portion represents the percentage of students who never got bored in online lessons.
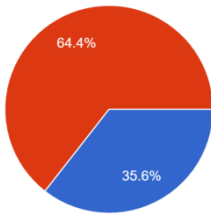
The vast majority, however, appreciate the fact that online lessons are more interactive and feel more involved precisely because of games and video and audio materials. Among other benefits, the students mentioned that they are not attached to the place, having the opportunity to participate in the lessons from wherever they have internet connection. Due to this, they can learn English without having to endanger their health in the context of the pandemic. They find online learning as effective as physical learning, in the context in which they work with the cameras on and there is eye contact. When asked about the difficulties they encountered in learning online, the students only mentioned technical issues, such as the possibility of a bad connection. Some students say that the connection between student and teacher cannot be made in online format as it happens at the lessons with physical presence. Some students do need eye contact, they need to understand when the teacher looks at them, they need to see the teacher's reaction to their answers. We can assume that the online format affects the relationship between the students in the same way, even if the students have not mentioned this in their answers. People need eye contact in order to be able to form friendships and to be able to get closer to each other. However, students in this way can focus more on studying and less on building relationships with others. It would be appropriate to mention that during the online study period no conflict situations were observed between students, and the relationship between them was quite friendly and warm, so that, from the students' words, even outside of class some students communicated through social networks. Except for these details, the other aspects are fully satisfied by online education. This tells us about the fact that information technologies have managed to become an alternative way of learning with the maximum possible efficiency. In some ways, online learning prevails over classroom learning and can lead to good results in the same amount of time.

4. Conclusion

The fact that information technologies have become an important part of our lives and have taken over the educational field, has determined us to focus all our

efforts on improving the conditions for online teaching and learning. We analysed the literature to determine how information technologies have come to influence education. We have also mentioned some useful online tools for both teachers and students. The study we conducted helped us to determine that online learning issues from the students' point of view are represented by possible technical problems and the difficulty of making connections with other people. Computer-assisted learning remains effective for most students.

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