Part 3

Education Policy, Reforms and School Leadership

GILLIAN L. S. HILTON

USING E-LEARNING TO ENHANCE THE LEARNING OF ADDITIONAL LANGUAGES - A PILOT COMPARATIVE STUDY

Abstract

This paper is concerned with a small pilot study to ascertain the use of, and changes in the use of e-learning to promote the learning of foreign and additional languages in a variety of countries in Europe. It was undertaken by individual researchers in an attempt to examine how the drive towards the teaching of new languages, encouraged by the European Commission is progressing. In addition the researchers were anxious to ascertain if in the last two years there had been any noticeable changes in the amount and type of e-learning/technology used in language teaching. Questionnaires were issued to school leaders to discover the type of school being researched, for example numbers and ages of students and numbers of staff. The teaching of languages other than the main language of the country was explored either as additional language teaching of the home language (EAL) or instruction in foreign languages (MFL). In addition specialist teachers were asked about their use of e-learning to aid the teaching of languages and if this use had changed in recent years. At present results from five countries Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Turkey and England have been received with those from Greece and Ireland as yet to be processed. The results show a great variety in the amount of EAL language and new foreign language teaching occurring and a great variance in the use and application of e-learning despite the drive towards e-learning which is so prominently on the political agenda.

Introduction

Prensky (2001: 1) is of the view that

Our students have changed radically. ... Our students today are all native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the internet.

The world has become a global village due to the fast and continuing advancement of technology. Hence, use of computers in teaching and learning languages can support and encourage students' learning capacity. Moreover, a computer is a tool which is now familiar to many children in the developed world and if often a child's favourite toy. Prensky (2001: 1) also writes that children spend '10,000 hours' on computers for playing 'games' and that these 'digital natives' can

learn better in this changing world scenario where according to Carnall (1990: 1), 'the only constant is change'.

At Lisbon, in March 2000, education saw the development of Community coordinated strategies for greater convergence of national policies (through the Education and Training 2010 programme) along with employment (through the European Employment Strategy, ESA) and the economy (through the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines, BPEGs). Accordingly, European education and training systems gained a new pivotal role in what concerns the renewed prosperity of the Union. One consideration has been the importance of the learning of foreign languages in European classrooms to encourage the movement of workers within the EU and also to being the peoples of the EU together with improved understanding of each other. The EU has twenty three official languages and over sixty indigenous regional languages and as the community grows so do the number of languages. In addition massive immigration to the EU has, in recent years, added many more languages particularly from Africa and Asia to the mix of those spoken at home by students in the countries of the Community (European Commission, 2013).

Language learning policy is clear and is detailed in a variety of policy documents which set out the ambition for citizens of the EU to become multi-lingual.

> EU language policies aim to protect linguistic diversity and promote <u>knowledge of languages</u> – for reasons of cultural identity and social integration, but also because multilingual citizens are better placed to take advantage of the educational, professional and economic opportunities created by an integrated Europe.

> The goal is a Europe where everyone can speak at least **two other languages** in addition to their own mother tongue (European Commission, 2013: no page).

These are worthy aims but not as yet achieved, or likely to be, in a time of budget reductions and the struggle in many countries to help students speak and write at least the national language well. Some countries, such as The Netherlands, are well to the fore with the provision of multi-language schools where students are taught in a variety of languages, whilst others, for example England have to fight a battle to maintain language teaching. The previous Labour government made language learning in England optional from the age of fourteen and put some provision for the first time into state primary schools. However, the result was a massive drop in the numbers of applications to study languages at university and a return to the concept that if one shouts loudly and slowly in English even foreigners would understand (Vasagar, 2012).

During the last fifty years, English speaking countries like Great Britain, Australia, Canada and USA have become 'linguistically diverse' societies due to immigrants' influx from different countries around the world (Leung & Creese, 2010: 1). To provide the statistics about school pupils in this regard, citing National Statistics, 2007, Leung and Creese state that in England for example, 13.5% of the primary school students are considered to be learning English as an additional or second language (EAL/ESL) while according to EdSource (2008 as cited in Leung & Creese, 2010), these figures are 25% in California. However, in England there is a much wider variety of first languages for students in school than in California where

the main first language for EAL students is Spanish. Leung and Creese (2010: 1) also write that education systems have adopted different teaching approaches to teach EAL students. Some provide 'intensive initial EAL tuition' while some provide these learners every possible access to the 'main school curriculum'.

The present Coalition Government in England wants to encourage rapid language understanding among EAL learners so that they can adjust to the main stream class rooms quickly (Summary of Government Policy for EAL learners, 2012). This report further states that in January, 2011 census, the ratio of EAL students in 'state-funded primary schools' in England is '16.8%' and these students have lower achievement levels as compared to the pupils whose first language is English (p. 3). The report also emphasises that EAL students are equally capable, so the learning practices prepared for them should be 'cognitively challenging' just like their peers (p. 3). Many of the learning needs of EAL learners are of course the same as those whose first language is English. However, these students have some different needs as well because they learn English as a second language (NALDIC, 1999 as cited in Milton Keynes Council Report, 2004). (Appendix 2.2) It is further stated in this publication that in the learning perspective, EAL students have two principal missions to achieve in school; understand English and master the components of National Curriculum the achievement of which strongly depends on the 'confidence' of the individual student. Writing about language learning Wharton and Race (1999: 4) also emphasise that language learning depends on 'confidence'. They further argue that in order to build this 'confidence', the learners of second language should be facilitated to get stability over the procedures they put into practice while learning language. The use of computers where students can learn at their own pace and also be stimulated and supported in their learning can allow practice and an increase in confidence, expanding exponentially with the provision of hardware and specifically designed software.

However, not all teachers are as experienced with the use of technology, as are their students who have grown up making use of a variety of devices from mobile phones to computer aided toys. Rudd et al (2004 as cited in Darmody et al, 2010) are of the view that technology is going to play a major role in the future of teaching and learning process because technology is considered to be a chief element in the process of change, so it is essential that teachers receive sufficient training in the area to have confidence in its use. Dwyer (1994, Sandholtz, Ringstaff & Dwyer, 1997 as cited in Rakes et al, 2006: 412) mention 'Apple Classroom of Tomorrow' (ACOT) research project in which, while analysing the data of that particular project, these researchers noticed enhancement in constructivist teaching methods in a technology rich classroom environment. However, Cuban (2001 as cited in Rakes et al, 2006: 412) states that more research is required to find the connection between teachers' use of Information Technology and pedagogical procedures because the teachers in most of the educational institutions are using technology to aid their conventional teaching methodologies not as a way of fostering 'innovative constructive practices'.

Students whose first language is not the native one can be held back by their lack of proficiency and with the rise in the movement of peoples across continents more and more countries are having to cope with the arrival of students who have no knowledge of the country's language yet are expected in assessments such as PISA

to obtain similar results to native speakers. There needs are often the same as those for students learning another language (MFL) and the use of modern technology is increasing for teaching in these areas as it is in other subjects.

The research

This is being carried out by a group of academics and PhD students from across Europe and Turkey as an initial pilot to discover what issues are faced by teachers in aiding foreign language and additional language learning. Researchers are at present from The Netherlands, Poland, England, Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Turkey. In order to define the beginnings of the research a meeting was held for interested parties in London in 2011 and via subsequent exchanges of ideas two data collection instruments were prepared. As this is just an initial stage questionnaires were used which could be completed on-line or face to face using a structured interview technique. This approach was devised in order to overcome the reluctance of many teachers to fill in questionnaires or even to take part in research. In England for example some schools ask that anyone conducting research in a school must have Criminal Record Bureau clearance (despite this being completely unnecessary as at no time were researcher s working with children). The first questionnaire determined the type of school, primary or secondary, numbers of students and teachers, and the ethnic mix of the school. Languages taught and the need for additional language provision. Information about the teachers involved in teaching languages was also discovered, ages, sex and years of experience. The second questionnaire elicited information from language specialists on whether it was national policy to use ICT in the curriculum of the country researched and whether it is integrated across the curriculum or taught as a separate subject. Respondents were asked to say if there were subjects in school where ICT/e-learning was never or seldom used and if it is used widely in the rest of the curriculum. The questionnaire also asked if the percentage use of e-learning had increased in the last two years and what reasons could be given for its use. Respondents were asked to detail the hardware available in the school and who uses it (just the IT specialist, all teachers, students). Whether e-learning had any advantages over other teaching methods was asked and if yes what these were. Teachers were asked if they used commercial or school produced software packages. Finally questions were asked about how ICT was used to link the school with the wider community, e.g. parents, other schools via Comenius etc. Specific to language learning questions were asked what e-learning tools were used to teach languages, if the teacher found these of help to the children and if there had been an increase in use over recent years.

Results

At present the following results have been received. Data from three Dutch, two Polish, three Turkish and three English primary schools has been received along with information from two Portuguese, one Turkish and two English secondary schools. The results are still being processed but the variety of school make up is obvious.

In the Netherlands almost 100% of the pupils in the schools surveyed were white no doubt based in the fact that the research took place in a part of the country

with a very low ethnic mix. Similar results on the lack of an ethnic mix in class makeup were obtained from Poland and Turkey, where in most cases the question about students and home language use was 100%. In England however, results from the London area showed that 10 – 51% of the students had English as a first language with up to eight major languages used in the school by students and many minor languages. In all the schools apart from those in England, English was the main foreign language taught whilst in England it was French and one school Mandarin with French also from year three (age 7/8). Many other languages were offered on a voluntary basis (not in Turkey) such as German, French, Spanish, Mandarin and Arabic, often via clubs in lunch hours or after school. Staff were 99% female and much of the language teaching was done by class teachers. Staff's experience varied across all schools from two to fifteen years.

In the secondary school returns have only been received from two schools in Portugal one in Turkey and two in England so far. Again the ethnic mix is far higher in England than in the other countries with 6% of students having EAL needs with Portugal returning a 100% response for students all having Portuguese as their first language and a nil return from Turkey to this question. Again the main language studied in Portugal and Turkey is English with French being compulsory in one English school with a variety of other languages available as 'a guided choice' including British sign language. Language teaching was mainly undertaken by specialists most of whom were females, particularly as students increased in fluency and in England it is possible to take examinations in a wide variety of languages such as those from the Indian sub-continent and China.

Use of e-learning varied widely in both secondary and primary sectors between schools and between countries. In some countries it is apparent that little ICT provision is present for language teaching in primary schools and few computers are available for students to use in the classroom in Poland. This is less true in the Netherlands and England where staff reported the wide use of technology to support learning, e.g. dictionaries, translation, games, specific commercial packages or material designed in the school. More of these technologies were present in secondary schools but it appears that the approach to language teaching and the use of e-learning is left to the school and even to the individual teacher and their competence in the use of the technology. One English primary school had a clear policy of approach and used commercial e-learning packages (teachers had no time to prepare their own) and the head here stressed the provision of training for staff. One primary school was connected to another one in France and students regularly exchanged emails and written work to improve their fluency in writing in a foreign language. In the secondary schools e-learning was part of the curriculum in most countries but again the amount of spread across the curriculum varied. Physical education was the subject most often reported as not making use of e-learning but also in some cases art which is surprising. Possibly again here is the need for not only the provision of soft and hard ware but the need to train teachers in the pedagogic use of ICT.

Conclusion

These are at present preliminary results but what small findings come from this pilot do not seem to reach the high aspirations of the European Commission in

making Europe an area where everyone uses more than one language. The problems are many, lack of hard and software in appropriate languages, training of teachers, choosing which languages to promote (a particular problem in England), government policies which are always changing, the large numbers of immigrants speaking a very wide variety of world languages and insularity on the part of some citizens who believe that there is only one world language, namely English. The high ideals and ambitions of the Commission mean that countries and schools have a long way to go to achieve success. Wolf (2013) points out that in Brussels there has been a long held view that states would converge including in the area of education. So much did the EU bureaucrats believe this, that they were unhappy when she insisted on using the word divergence in a report on education within the EU. The findings of that report see no real evidence of convergence between the states despite the dictates of Bologna etc. agreements. In a small way this study is beginning to demonstrate similar findings though further data and analysis are needed. Should we therefore say 'vive la difference'?

References

Carnall, C. A. (1990): *Managing Change in Organizations.* Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall.

Darmody, M., Smyth, E., Doherty, C. (2010): *Designing Primary Schools of the Future.* http://www.tara.tcd.ie/bitstream/2262/56262/1/RS016.pdf (accessed 13/08/2012).

European Commission (2013): *Languages.* http://ec.europa.eu/languages/languages-of-europe/index_en.htm (accessed 25.01.2013).

Leung, C. & Creese, A. (2010): *English as an additional language: approaches to teaching linguistic minority students.* London: Sage.

Milton Keynes Council Report (2004): *Milton Keynes Ethnic Minority Achievement Support Service.* http://www.mkweb.co.uk/emass/documents/Website_EAL_Artwork.pdf (accessed 04/06/2012).

Prensky, M. (2001): Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. *On the Horizon,* 9 (5). http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/prensky%20-%20digital%20natives,%20digital%20immigrants%20-%20part1.pdf (accessed 30/04/2012).

Rakes, G. C., Fields, V. S., Cox, K. E. (2006): The Influence of Teachers' Technology Use on Instructional Practices. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education,* 38 (4), 409-424.

Summary of Government Policy in relation to EAL Learners (2012): http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/202461_200053_brief_summary_of_Government_policy_in_relation_to_EAL_Learners.pdf (accessed 04/06/2012).

Vasagar, J. (2012): A-level foreign languages decline alarms examiners. *The Guardian.* http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/aug/16/alevel-foreign-languages-decline (accessed 24.01.2013).

Wharton, S. & Race, P. (1999): *500 tips for TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages).* London: Kogan Page.

Dr. Gillian L. S. Hilton
Middlesex University London
United Kingdom
gillianlshilton@gmail.com