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COMPUTERS IN TEACHING POLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

1. Computers are not capable of substituting language teachers. It is impossible even when a teaching/learning process becomes more a learning process and a teacher fulfills an inspirational, guiding and organizing rather than instructing role. However, thanks to its advantages it can very often replace a teacher in some activities, it can make a teacher's job easier and more pleasant, at the same time making learning more enjoyable for students. Computer can, moreover, make learning process faster and more optimal. In some situations a computer can also fulfill a function of a channel which enables communication between a student and a teacher. If learners live far away from the country whose language they learn, a computer provides the unique possibility of contact with a teacher who is a native speaker, a professional who is able to explain various issues in a more precise way, sometimes in a more accurate way than a non-native speaker. Therefore, one should agree that a computer can be a great device that supports both learning and teaching.

Great usefulness of a computer as a didactic tool is, among many other things, related to the fact that a computer accumulates features of such tools already present in language learning as a book (or - to a larger extent - a workbook with a key), language laboratory, a video and audio tape. It makes use of what is most characteristic: text, image, photo, animation and sound. It replaces traditional tools and also has another advantage: it enables one to repeat exercises again and again, using the same material. All those features make the use of computer even required in didactic processes.

One should also take into account computerization of the world and the fact that a computer is available for nearly every student and learner. More and more people are connected to the Internet, mainly thanks to modems installed in their personal computers. It should be added that very important advantages of such communication are its low cost and speed. The only medium which can compete with the Internet is regular mail but this works very slowly. And even here Internet becomes much cheaper e.g. as far as access to professional information is concerned. If one would like to take a look at the paintings from the Louvres Museum he or she could order an expensive album or use the Internet almost

for free. As far as traditional communication is concerned the speed of fax or telephone is similar to this of electronic mail but the expenses are incomparably high.

It is possible to use computers in language learning in organized groups and classes as a local network and it is also possible to arrange learning in virtual reality classes as well as in the process of distant collective or individual teaching or learning.

We should, eventually, claim that the significance of the present "computer revolution" is similar to the one introduced by the invention of print. It is not only the possibility of storing data, multimedia functions of devices and the possibility of creating a global village, which can all be compared to the possibilities of copying and recording which had already been offered by the printing and the book. The case is in formation of consciousness by means of electronic media. We guess that the Internet navigation, so similar to TV channel switching, is already beginning to shape the ways of perceiving and understanding the world (especially culture) as well as ways of sending and decoding meanings. As it has already been described, everything, obviously, depends on the amount of information stored in the world, the information which we are unable to receive, let alone processing it in a traditional way.

Therefore, in the contemporary world such institutions as "schools of fast reading" have come into existence. In those schools one is taught how to get to know the contents of a book only by means of turning over pages and scanning them. For linguists and literary critics it is not unimportant that Roland Barthes, one of the pioneers of modern understanding of text, which gave the basis for the theory of intertextuality, describes the text structure in categories of hypertext and compares reading of a book to text navigation. It seems that cognitive theories of meaning use notions, which are, at least, equivalent to the ones used in the description of the Internet hypertext's structure and the way it functions.

As a matter of fact, the transformation from the typographic to the electronic culture is more and more noticeable.

2. As we have pointed out, those are the most general advantages of a computer as a device supporting teaching/learning process. We have mentioned its multimedia functions, enabling fast and cheap long-distance communication, possibility of storing enormous amount of data, its unusual, machine-like patience.

It seems, however, that it is possible to have a more detailed classification of situations in which a computer can be applied in teaching/learning process. The basis for this classification might be a way of applying technical facilities of a computer which implies, at the same time, certain didactic situations useful at both elementary and more advanced levels. While making a survey of those situations, we will concentrate on the possibilities of foreign language teaching, without mentioning the opportunities offered for teaching literature and culture.

It is also worth noticing that the survey as such reflects, to some extent, history and evolution of forming those facilities and that it describes a certain state of potential situations. Pointing to those situations in foreign (basically Polish) language teaching and the attempt at making their typology is only to some extent the history of actual applying the computer in educational situations.

Generally speaking, one can distinguish four situations - possibilities of applying the computer in language teaching and learning, possibilities which are important from techno-

logical and didactic point of view:

The 1st situation occurs when, from the technical perspective, a computer is used as an advanced typewriter.

The 2nd situation occurs when we use professional word processors.

The 3rd situation occurs when we use a computer as a playing device which enables setting up educational and didactic programs as well as language games.

The 4th situation occurs when we use a computer as a playing device which has multimedia functions (text, image, sound, animation) and which allows sound and image' digitalization.

Obviously, the first situation is technically and didactically the most simple one and, to some extent, chronologically primary. In such a situation we use a computer as an advanced typewriter. From didactic perspective a computer functions as a copy-book. It can be, therefore, even a very old and simple computer. In this case we apply only capabilities of computer word processing, which is profitable in comparison to ordinary handwriting because it enables immediate text correction, its copying, reconstruction and modification (by means of 'cut', 'copy' and 'paste' commands). It also enables saving a few versions of the same text almost at the same time. In this way a computer may serve the purpose of teaching dictated writing and reading of the recorded/written text on the elementary level, yet the whole process is controlled by a teacher who, at the same time, prepares exercises. Such advantages of a computer can also be used in teaching spelling and punctuation. On the advanced level of learning it is not insignificant that a computer used in such a way may serve the purpose of simple text editing.

The second situation occurs when we use professional text editors in the teaching/learning process.

Depending on the type of editor, a computer may serve the purpose of learning dictated writing, reading, spelling and punctuation. In this case, it is important that one can work with the help of computer spell checkers (e.g. for Word 6.0 and Word 97), although we must always remember that those programs contain a certain number of mistakes resulting basically from the lack of many words (e.g. even in the Polish version of this text, the spell checker for quite modern Word 97 does not accept such words as *internetowy*, *multimedialny*, *zeskanowany* and even the word *szanse*) but also, and this may cause even more trouble, it can result from the fact that in dictionaries some words are spelled in the wrong way.

Such spell checkers may, to some extent, make the learning more self-sufficient, on the other hand, however, a teacher is needed as an arbiter. Modern editors may be used during classes on intermediate and advanced levels because they enable linguistic and stylistic texts' preparation by means of such options as 'find' and 'replace' and mistakes' correctors.

The third situation occurs when we use a computer as a playing device which makes it possible to install educational and didactic programs, as well as language games. It can be said that a computer changes its function from a notebook to a book and an exercise-book. We mean, in this case, popular 'teachers', programs which allow to learn meanings of words, simple syntactic and lexical structures. And here, being aware of the fact that we discuss here about teaching Polish as a foreign language, we should add, that there is no professional "teacher" for teaching Polish as a foreign language. Lector can cope with the situation by means of programs produced for Polish users (children and high school stu-

dents), though most of those programs teach mainly spelling. The problem is, in a sense, doubled because there is a big difference between spelling difficulties of a foreigner and a native speaker. One could also ask a computer programmer for assistance in order to reconstruct already existing programs teaching English or German, if only it does not violate copyright law. One should remember that those programs are usually poorly equipped (with exceptions of e.g. *Dr. HENRY*) as far as the interface is concerned and this does not make them attractive.

The fourth situation occurs when we use a computer as a playing multimedia device (text, image, sound, animation) with the possibility of sound and image digitalization. Such a computer enables the setup of advanced language teaching programs, therefore, it functions as a "manual" which works even without a teacher's assistance (interactive programs). The installed interactive programs teach writing, reading, spelling, punctuation and grammar, they offer a possibility of learning language reactions in simple communicational situations. Certainly, we are thinking of such huge, complex programs as Euro+, which seem to serve all those purposes on different languages levels, by means of all available media (text, drawing, photo, sound, animation, film). Here, however, we come across a financial problem. These programs are expensive, the investment in their production, in case of English, is probable to pay for itself. However, in case of Polish we should rather think of a series of smaller, single-task programs. *DYKTANDO* by E. Polański and D. Krzyżyk published by Zip Soft can be considered such a program. Products of our School GRAMPOL and FRAZPOL are also supposed to be like this – they are already provided with sound and they function on CD-ROMs, not on floppy-discs which are of too little capacity.

The situations presented here take into account functions of a computer as an independent device-stand. One should, however, remember that possibilities of using the computer in teaching are getting more and more attractive when we consider the fact that it can work as a part of network. Network connection enables both exploring the storage of various servers and communication between its users. And these are the next technological situations in which we can use computer in language teaching on the advanced level.

The first situation, as it has been mentioned, occurs when a computer is connected to the network in order to make possible exploration of the Internet resources. It can be a process of self-education and self-improvement of language skills or a process methodically planned by a teacher. Such processes would be based on exploring Polish websites. The websites could be published and owned by Polish massmedia or they could be the sites dedicated to literature, they might contain literary works, too. New opportunities now arise, concerning preparation of special educational websites which could be used by learners.

Our School's website (<http://szkola.us.edu.pl>) is the germ of such sites. There, learners can find GRAMPOL, our program supporting Polish language learning (unfortunately without sound because copying the sound files up to 5690 items would last too long), there, they can read Miłosz's poetry and listen to the poet himself reciting them, there learners can read the Internet version of *Postscriptum*, which is the journal published by our School. Obviously, this is only the beginning. Educational websites would have to be designed in the pattern of former "Mosaics" for foreign language learning. They should also be stored in one place, for example on the sites of the Bristol association. They could also contain appropriate links to documents which undergo some changes on a regular basis (newspla-

per articles). Another advantage is that Internet resources can be used in long-distance teaching, in other words, in virtual school.

Thanks to the fact that a computer works as a part of the network and enables communication between users, there is a possibility of creating a virtual school in which long-distance teaching takes place. One of the main elements is, in this case, electronic mail. Thanks to e-mail some forms of correspondence teaching can take place, e.g. testing learners. There is no problem with the lack of Polish characters in most e-mail programs. Gap-filling tests can be sent as attachments created in any program suitable both for a learner and a teacher. It can even have a form of scanned images. One of the forms of a virtual school is "tandem teaching". The option of on-line communication is important because learning can take place in the actual time of corresponding. Such opportunities are made by e-mail and 'chats', especially IRC.

IRC, Internet Relay Chat, is a tool serving the purpose of live communication on the Internet. By means of proper software users make connections to servers, which create IRC. In this network a user is identified by a nickname (in Polish *pseudonim*, *ksywka* and *nick*). The chat means sending messages between the users. A message usually reaches a user after a few seconds. There can be private chats, not seen by other people, then the messages are sent to other IRC user. One can also take part in discussion groups. In order to do this one should join a special channel which has its topic (command 'join' or a proper button on the software). Simultaneously, there can be many users in one channel. Everything we write in the channel is transmitted to all those who are in a given channel at the same time. Names of channels start traditionally with # sign (e.g. #polska).

The network functions by means of servers which are connected with each other and which transmit messages written by users.

And it is here where there is a chance of using IRC for language needs. Language learning does not only mean doing exercises in the laboratory but it should also be a conversation which helps one consolidate acquired knowledge or, when led by a teacher, also helps them acquire new knowledge. It is interesting that IRC allows one to fulfill those aims of a chat in a more natural way than a traditional lesson does. What is more, IRC makes it possible to use the acquired knowledge in a natural chat with other learners or with native speakers. IRC chat is either an element of guided class or it is an uncontrolled chat of a learner who is at the same time a network user.

IRC is a great tool for distance teaching, offering the opportunity of a specific kind of lesson. Such a lesson would mean a chat between a teacher staying in Poland and students staying somewhere else in the world. A teacher might also suggest a chat instead of giving a written homework.

One of the advantages of the IRC is the fact that it is often used by young people, mainly students. Obviously, in Poland it functions more as a sort of a cheap party line than a serious discussion group. However, the fact that IRC is for its users the only option of using the Internet and also an important form of social life is useful in the teaching process. IRC charms as a game and such features as anonymity or invisibility of a user may be treated both as advantages and disadvantages. A student who is not seen by a teacher becomes courageous.

What is also important, it is the fact that while e-mail enables writing letters and doing exercises, IRC, even if we use keyboard, enables quasi-conversation or discussion. It enables, therefore, at least to some extent, practicing language speaking skills. American

research on this phenomenon proves that in this case we deal with the so-called secondary orality of a message.

This survey proves that one could discuss very long using a computer for teaching Polish as a foreign language, also in the future. Still, there are some programs waiting to be created, programs which would fully use all facilities offered by this modern device. And then, as we hope, the computer will open the door to its new options and possibilities.