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Multicultural Classroom The Potential of ICT for Intercultural Integration of Children in Primary Schools

Marianne Ebenhofer, Anton Knierzinger

education highway, Pädagogische Hochschule der Diözese Linz

Key words: *Intercultural Integration, Primary School, ICT*

Abstract:

Migration is a worldwide phenomenon these days. Thus schools and in particular primary schools have to face the challenge of multicultural classrooms. Information and communication technologies can support the integration process of those children, as they can contribute to the main issues of intercultural integration.

1 Introduction

Up to now the main focus has been on the integration of ICT and new media in education. The main challenge for the future will be the contribution of solutions for the essential problems of the educational system. Thereby the significance of ICT in education will be determined and evaluated by the extent to which it can contribute to the development of the school system in general.

As migration is a worldwide phenomenon these days schools and primary schools in particular have to face the challenge of multicultural classrooms. In addition to social aspects and the different learning styles and abilities of the students multicultural classrooms are characterized by a diversity of educational backgrounds and language skills. So the question is obvious: "Can ICT support intercultural integration?"

2 ICT & Intercultural Integration

We want to support the theory that information and communication technologies can facilitate and support the integration of migrants, as they can contribute to the three main issues of intercultural integration.

2.1 Foreign Language Acquisition

Language is an essential condition for the social integration of immigrants, as verbal abilities are essential for educational and later on professional success.¹

If computers are utilised in a constructive and fruitful way they can support the acquisition of the foreign language.² Kohn³ states among others that in computer assisted language learning the multimedia factor is especially convincing. Text, sound, pictures and video resources can be combined on demand and merged into multimedia packages to properly accomplish activities like listening, reading, writing and speaking. Roche⁴ confirms that media can contribute to improve the quality of language teaching and learning. He stresses that

technology should be used interactively and non-linear. Traditional means of communication and teaching should not be replaced by digital forms. E-media and e-tools that play an important role in modern everyday communication should be used authentically in the language classroom.

Moreover R. Cohen's research shows that ICT can support the literacy of very young children who speak a foreign language. She notes „In our experience, many of our young children were non-francophone. For them French was a foreign language. But using a computer equipped with a voice synthesizer made them acquire both oral and written French simultaneously and without difficulty before age 6. [...] The joy and enthusiasm observed in computer-based activities leads us to think that computer may be a very 'good thing' for young children and that the written language can be acquired just as easily as the oral language without tedious repetitions or predefined progression. In our experience, children using computers have increased their language abilities and have become interested in sentences, spelling and punctuation much earlier than what is generally considered as 'usual'.”⁵

2.2 First Language Usage

Speaking another first language is seldom regarded as an advantage and children feel the pressure to learn the language of the country they currently reside in. The usage of the mother-tongue is limited to the communication out of school and to the family.⁶ According to Neuner⁷ this often results in a lack of verbal abilities in both languages, causing limited communicative skills and inhibiting the development of the individual's identity. For this and many other reasons the students' abilities in their first languages have to be encouraged and developed further at school. He notices however that the number of lessons in these first languages depends on the availability of teachers who speak these languages as their mother-tongues and on the number of students and the homogeneity of the groups concerned.

ICT opens up new opportunities to overcome these problems in case children are provided with learning material and information in their native languages. E.g. multimedia online dictionaries can be a first step to overcome language barriers in a simple and fast way. Also child-oriented websites and wikis in their mother-tongues offer opportunities to learn about topics in their own languages.

Didactically designed videos can be a benefit for efficient learning. The eduMEDIASERVICE, a modern streaming video on demand service developed by education highway (<http://estream.schule.at>) offers a full range of didactical material in addition to the video. Beside the film, internet and text resources offer background information and learning material. This supports self-organized learning and encourages information-retrieval by the children, making the students active learners rather than passive consumers. Furthermore the multilingual service is adaptable for any language and offers useful additional features like the transcript of the speakers' texts and subtitles of the videos. So this service leads to a better understanding of content and supports linguistic skills at the same time.

By individualizing the learning process valuable time can be saved and used for supplementary exercises or language learning. Thus first languages can be used in a supporting and esteeming way which can lead to the revaluation of the first languages.

2.3 Intercultural Learning

The demand for intercultural competences is increasing, not only at school but also or even more so at the workplace and in society in general. By offering and supporting intercultural learning schools play an important part in the development of these skills.⁸

Primary Schools often deal with intercultural topics in form of projects. This constructivist learning-style itself is - especially in multicultural classrooms - a way of gaining intercultural competence. ICT can support project-oriented learning at all stages of the child's development. According to Wöckel we can distinguish between four basic kinds of using the internet (research, publishing, corresponding, cooperating) thus showing the benefit of ICT in this context.

For teachers and students the internet is an easy way to get in-depth knowledge and visual information on the children's countries of origin and culture. Moreover questions on topical subjects can be answered more efficiently. Publishing the students' work on intercultural topics has a motivating effect on the "authors" and leads to the dissemination of the topics concerned as well as contributing to the sensitivity of the readers. Last but not least ICT facilitates and supports quick and easy communication in cross-border projects and partnerships. Besides it offers several ways of collaboration for teachers and even young learners.

3 Prospects

At present the potential of new media has not been fully exploited yet on the pre- and primary school levels. This is due to inadequate technical equipment on the one hand and insufficient know-how of teachers concerning didactical models and technical aspects on the other hand as well as to the lack of digital learning opportunities and adequate learning platforms.

When education takes place in a multi-cultural setting and wants to foster an intercultural mindset, it can not meet the requirements of the heterogeneous learning environments of the classrooms without the implementation of ICT-supported didactical models and methods. Educational policy will also have to face the challenge of an increasingly multi-cultural society. It will be the task of institutions for teacher training and in-service training of teachers however, to develop the partially still dormant potential of ICT for the cultural integration of children in primary schools.

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Author(s):

Marianne Ebenhofer, MSC
education highway
Hafenstraße 47 -51, 4020 Linz
m.ebenhofer@ist.eduhi.at

Anton Knierzinger, Mag.
Pädagogische Hochschule der Dioezese Linz
Salesianumweg 3, 4020 Linz
kna@ph-linz.at