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ICT in Schools: Effect of government initiatives

Secondary Modern Foreign Languages

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ICT in Schools: Effect of government initiatives

Secondary Modern Foreign Languages

1. This report is based on subject-specific evidence from secondary schools visits made as part of the inspection of government information and communication technology (ICT) initiatives between May and December 2001. This contributed to the main report, *ICT in Schools: Effect of government initiatives*, which is available from the OFSTED Publications Centre (07002 637833) or via the OFSTED web site (www.ofsted.gov.uk).

Effect of the initiatives

Teaching and learning

2. The increased use of ICT has had a beneficial effect on the preparation of materials for lessons. Word-processing and desktop publishing have, for example, improved the quality and presentation of cue cards and worksheets. The Internet is proving an invaluable source of authentic material, which many teachers are using increasingly to enrich their materials.

3. The effect of ICT applications on teaching and learning has been uneven with activities often limited to consolidation and practice, using commercial tutorial packages on CD-ROM linked to a course book. Although many of these have much to offer, they are often used uncritically and unselectively. This has meant that teaching with ICT in some schools has tended to be 'textbook led' and tasks are not always well matched to pupils' needs. For example:

Less able pupils in a Year 7 class on travel were confused by the complex layout of a railway departure board with a 24-hour clock and by written questions giving times in words rather than figures. This confusion prevented them from using the French that they did have, but the problem was not anticipated.

4. The creative uses of ICT in MFL are still underdeveloped, with few teachers seeing the full possibilities of word-processing for manipulation of language and drafting, so that word-processing is too often seen as simply a tool for 'copying up'. Text manipulation packages are being used more often. One of the more successful packages was originally designed for less sophisticated technology some ten years ago. This is still one of the most effective, particularly with able pupils, but also with the less able, including those with SEN, as in the following Year 8 German lesson on 'travelling by bus'.

The ICT was planned as an integral part of the lesson. Pupils had been working with the teacher from the coursebook before moving on to the computers to consolidate learning with text manipulation activities. The teacher gave lots of individual help to pupils. The classroom assistant was very supportive, working mainly with a pupil with a statement. During the last ten minutes pupils moved away from the computers and the teacher checked learning with substitution exercises using OHP prompts, gestures and drawing comparisons with English to support pupils' understanding. This was conducted in German. All pupils were prepared to be involved.

Pupils clearly made gains in learning and demonstrated good understanding and production at a simple level according to ability. The level of attainment was 2 to 3 overall. All demonstrated great enjoyment and were well behaved. They were supportive of each other during all parts of the lesson and the statemented pupil was able to contribute in German.

Pupils were clearly finding the ICT element helpful. They were motivated, constantly on task, thinking, trying to work the language out. The ICT helped them to focus and think about the language, additionally supporting their literacy skills.

The installation of French character keys was very helpful for pupils in accessing accents (the method on the software was not very user-friendly and this addition enabled swift access maximising use of time).

5. The use of e-mail in MFL is surprisingly rare, despite the immense possibilities it offers for communication with 'real audiences' abroad. Sometimes this is due to technical incompatibility with other countries or the reluctance of teachers there to see the possibilities. More often it is because schools have become more cautious in extending e-mail access, because of child-protection issues. Relatively few schools have access to video-conferencing; those that have are still feeling their way and establishing partnerships abroad. In one case a school was waiting for its partners in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands to become appropriately equipped.

6. The use of the Internet has expanded dramatically in the last two years. However, although the authenticity of real text and image has improved pupil motivation, its exploitation in lessons is frequently unimaginative. For example, pupils may be asked to carry out rather simplistic searches (for example, 'look for something interesting on . . .') and download large sections of text or photographs or graphics. In the worst cases, pupils may end up after an hour with little more than (say) a picture of the Eiffel Tower and a caption. Search techniques and reading skills are still underdeveloped, but there are examples of good practice.

7. Some departments worked effectively by team teaching and pooling the ICT facilities and teachers available to two classes. For example, Year 9 pupils in one school were set a project on holidays to prepare the way for coursework in Year 10.

In French, pupils were to prepare a dossier for three prospective visitors to Paris. Pupils who had been on a visit to Germany had to write diary in German; those who had not had to write a publicity brochure for future visitors. The French programme involved pen-pictures in French of three clients of different ages whose needs pupils had to match via the Internet. There was a good balance between allowing pupils to search selected sites and working from previously printed out material with worksheets to focus their reading. The diary ('Mein Tagebuch') was an open-ended task in which pupils drew on tasks drafted during the visit to Germany together with collected postcards and photographs for scanning. The German publicity project was well designed with seven selected web sites linked to a structured set of tasks. To save lesson time, some of the material had already been printed out and linked to worksheets.

The session required pupils to use reading skills on extended text and gave some scope for skimming and scanning. The best showed very good reading comprehension skills. The quality of some of the writing was a little disappointing. Several pupils needed to concentrate more on the proof-reading of such things as the use of capitals and word order and use the facilities of word-processing to remedy any errors.

The lesson was a worthwhile experience in bringing pupils into contact with a variety of texts and placing them in a position to identify appropriate cultural and other knowledge for themselves independently. The teachers' support was appropriately judged, striking a balance between giving guidance and not taking the responsibility away from pupils. Particular care was taken to ensure that the Internet provided a virtual experience for those who were unable to visit Germany.

8. The ICT applications so far in general use offer relatively little input to the development of speaking skills, other than reinforcement of pronunciation through the repetition of sounds and the practice of basic patterns in closely controlled exercises. A further issue is sustaining use of the target language in ICT lessons. Because of the technical difficulties involved, the target language tends to be superseded by English at least after the initial stages of the lesson. Therefore there is an 'opportunity cost' in MFL of putting on an ICT session. The development of speaking skills can often be promoted more effectively through the use of 'low tech' techniques such as audio recordings and the overhead projector (OHP) which most MFL teachers use well. The interactive whiteboard has tremendous potential as a stimulus for speakers, but the few MFL departments with access to one are still exploring its use.

9. Although there is good practice in planning, insufficient attention is given in many MFL departments to the question of when, and when not, to use ICT. The use of ICT is potentially a strong source of motivation, particularly for boys. Where this is harnessed to clear linguistic objectives and expectations, it significantly raises attainment. For example, the following Year 8 German lesson on tourism with a class of boys showed how the Internet could be used to motivate pupils by challenging them to use their language skills to analyse authentic texts. The pupils' prior work included directions and opinions about activities in towns. Pupils were asked to explore three German/Austrian web sites to find out about the facilities available to visitors.

The teacher organised the lesson in German, checking appropriately to ensure all pupils understood. Pupils were provided with well-structured questions to enable them to browse the web sites and glean the the maximum amount of additional information. There was some extension work for any pupils who completed the first three tasks. The three towns had already been 'met' briefly in the coursebook so this provided an up-to-date and much broader perspective. The teacher explained that, since this was the first time she had brought pupils in to work on the Internet, she felt that they would work better with questions in English. It did not detract from the lesson since she talked to the pupils in German and they accessed a lot of German text, using their skimming and scanning skills. She set up the pairs to work so that one used the keyboard and the other noted information, stopping them after 20 minutes and getting them to swap roles. The teacher was confident with the Internet and worked hard to make pupils think for themselves, using their own knowledge to provide answers. The final ten minutes were spent feeding back the information pupils had gathered and checking their answers.

Pupils worked well to their ability levels. They understood and responded appropriately to the teacher's explanations and instructions in German. Texts accessed were quite complex providing a good resource for opportunities at Level 4/5 and beyond. Pupils were able to extract detail from a variety of different types of authentic texts, language and styles. The use of the Internet provided up-to-date, culturally broadening information which linked well to the work pupils were doing with their coursebook. Pupils scrolled well through texts and did not waste time. Their ICT capability clearly supported their work in MFL.

10. Sometimes, however, assumptions are made that the mere use of ICT motivates pupils, particularly boys, and that raised attainment will automatically follow. Too often ICT is used as a 'bolt-on' to MFL lessons with insufficient thought given to its integration in schemes of work. Partly because of this, the quality of teaching with ICT is often varied, even within departments that are consistently successful in other respects.

Pupils' achievement

11. In many schools it is too early to evaluate the effect on pupils' achievement, as the increase in opportunities to use ICT in MFL is very recent and the ability to use a foreign language effectively has to be built up over sustained periods of time. Where evidence is available, there has been little or no effect so far in about one school in four. In the best cases however, the application of ICT to MFL has contributed to improving pupils' understanding of grammar and accuracy in using it, their listening and reading skills, their range of authentic vocabulary, and extended writing. Pupils can retrieve information from the Internet appropriately and use it to develop their foreign language learning through comparisons with other countries and communities. They are motivated by using the 'normal' French or German web sites that the people use; they can use e-mail to exchange information and ideas and to ask questions.

12. The use of ICT usually improves the presentation of pupils' work. Although there are dangers of time-wasting when the learning is not purposeful, pupils can, for example, exploit different fonts and layouts for narrative and description, brochures (for example on healthy eating), posters (for example, 'Lost', 'Wanted'); they also use clip-art, and produce multi-coloured charts to display the outcomes of surveys. Often, however, the improvement in presentation is not reflected in the accuracy of the writing. Indeed the quality of proof-reading can deteriorate in ICT-based lessons where the linguistic outcomes are not clearly expected and insisted upon. In some cases, pupils make errors when using word-processing which they do not make when writing in their exercise books.

13. Presentational software can also enhance pupils' creativity and accuracy even on mundane topics. For example, the following Year 9 French lesson was on 'daily routines':

Pupils had previously prepared their own presentations using a variety of language, persons and tense. (For example, one boy did it as if it was his dog's daily routine!) Pupils had to look carefully and decide what language elements were included, what National Curriculum level it represented, and how it could be raised a level. They eventually moved on to improve their texts and then to begin a new one on jobs around the house, trying for Level 6.

The teacher started by using the whiteboard, drawing pupils' attention to different elements of language composition, brainstorming with pupils, drawing on their knowledge, gathering together two lists which show progression from Level 5 to Level 6. Teacher used French to introduce the lesson and intermittently throughout. English was used for discussion.

Six pupils showed their presentations using the data projector so that the whole class could easily see them. They had worked hard to produce their presentations and were proud of their work. The class was asked to identify silently different language elements (for example, opinions, tenses, persons) corresponding to their brainstorm. After each presentation the class decided on the level and what might be added. The pupils were fascinated by their peers' work.

The pupils wrote at reasonable length with some accuracy using vocabulary from a variety of topics. Using presentational software made them focus on an audience. They were able to manipulate language items to produce a creative piece of work and understand how they can make progress and how this enables them to write what they want to write.

Implementation in schools

Management

14. Together with the overall planning and leadership of ICT developments in the school, the leadership of the head of MFL department in ICT is crucial. If the department is not well led, it is unlikely that ICT will be developed effectively within it. ICT is developed most effectively where detailed planning integrates its contribution into development plans and schemes of work and reflects the **linguistic** aims and objectives. The head of department leads by example, supports the MFL ICT co-ordinator, and ensures that both the quality and the extent of work using ICT are monitored and evaluated. Unfortunately, even in good departments the planning and monitoring of ICT-based work frequently lacks rigour. Unless ICT experiences in MFL are logged and reviewed systematically, heads of MFL may lack awareness of what is being provided across the groups and languages taught. Otherwise successful heads of department are often not as confident or competent in the application of ICT as younger colleagues. Some of the most effective leadership occurs where the head of department has been open to new ideas from younger colleagues (sometimes NQTs) in ICT and has incorporated them into the team's thinking. Where heads of MFL are accomplished users of ICT applications, their appreciation of the range of possibilities may be still narrow unless training has given them a comprehensive vision of the potential of ICT.

15. Most schemes of work for MFL have limited or no specific references to ICT. About a quarter of the departments were redrafting their scheme of work (and departmental development plan) at the time of the visit to incorporate ICT into MFL. However, further work was needed, for example on explicit links to the revised (Curriculum 2000) MFL Programme of Study or to provide specific guidance on how ICT activities could contribute to raising attainment.

16. Few MFL departments use ICT extensively in the management and analysis of pupils' achievement: this usually reflects the school's expectations of its departments or the degree of access for subject departments to central systems. About half the heads of MFL visited used spreadsheets for simple storage and analysis of marks. In a minority of schools the MFL department benefited extensively with other subject departments from the ready availability of baseline data and the tracking of pupils' subsequent progress using the school's assessment management systems. Electronic evidence rarely contributes to the recording and assessment of pupils' work in MFL, although there are 'low tech' examples of cassette-recordings of pupils' speaking used in assessment and moderation.

Staff development

17. Undoubtedly some MFL teachers have developed greatly both their confidence and competence as a result of NOF-funded training, but reactions to the training by teachers of MFL are frequently critical. The shortcomings most often identified are that providers offer insufficient subject-specific exemplification and training lacks an appropriate focus for MFL specialists. Some providers have potentially useful materials which are ineffective because, unless there is considerable ICT expertise and support already within the department, they are not user-friendly for the

uninitiated and subject-specific external mentoring to follow up training is not always available.

18. In-house arrangements for ICT training are often regarded as more useful by linguists. Many find that working together as a group with the support of a supportive ICT co-ordinator prepared to focus on their specific skills needs and with technician support, they can make considerable advances in thinking how the technology might be used to help them achieve improved linguistic outcomes. For example:

One MFL department had chosen to prioritise working together in directed time on integrating the use of the Internet into MFL work, using it as a catalyst for developing reading skills and stimulating writing; another had successfully paired the ICT co-ordinator with a French teacher for a 'focus' week in which colleagues observe each other's lessons, report back and discuss: the use of ICT in the MFL department generally benefited from this experience.

Resources and accommodation

19. Although NGfL funding has had a significant effect in increasing facilities across schools, increased access does not necessarily filter through to MFL. Access to rooms with ICT facilities is a significant issue in planning in MFL. In the worst circumstances, it can be hit or miss whether an ICT room is available at all during the year for particular MFL groups if their lessons do not coincide with free timetable slots. Elsewhere the MFL teacher may be lucky to be able to take his or her group into an ICT room more than once in each half term. It is difficult to integrate the uses of ICT seamlessly into other language work in such circumstances, and particularly so where the natural length of a unit of work is three to four weeks. Some MFL departments are able to make flexible use of dedicated clusters of computers. This assists the integration of ICT into MFL, but the 'carousel' arrangements needed for this to happen in lessons call for considerable management and monitoring skills.

20. Inflexible layouts in ICT rooms present difficulties, for example, when computers are arranged in solid ranks across the room. This reduces the opportunities for flexible demonstration to launch the lesson and to pick up teachers' points with the whole class, or the immediate practice of open-ended face-to-face oral work building on the tasks undertaken individually on the computers. If no large demonstration screen is available, it is particularly difficult to ensure that the whole class understands the tasks involved and their objectives, or to recap effectively with examples at the end of the lesson.

21. Although the availability of hardware has improved, the sharing of computers presents particular problems in MFL for communicative listening and speaking tasks which call for individual responses. These difficulties are exacerbated where there are insufficient headsets in working order for pupils to monitor each other's responses in pairs.

22. The range of MFL software held varies greatly: some departments, for example, may have no text manipulation software. The possibilities of using generic software (for example presentational software) are exploited well in some departments. Others, however, are unaware of the potential of such software for generating the use of language by pupils. The use of generic software can offset the relatively limited availability of dedicated materials in the less commonly taught languages. For example, a teacher of Panjabi was using DTP and word-processing

very effectively following NOF-funded training and the school's acquisition of software for non-roman scripts.

23. Specialist schools have often been able to develop the use of ICT in MFL more effectively than schools which have only received NGfL funding, even though the latter may have benefited the school as a whole. For example, they may be able to provide a multimedia suite dedicated to MFL use, or have greater access to interactive whiteboards or to video-conferencing.

24. The quality of technical support, when it is available, is often good. The ready availability of a technician almost invariably has a significant effect on improving teachers' confidence, the effective use of lesson time and, as a result, the quality of teaching and learning. Unfortunately technical support is often overstretched.