

Digital Technologies and Young Learners: Insights from a Case Study

Radmila Popovic

E-mail: rpopovic27@yahoo.com

University of Belgrade (Serbia)

Abstract

One of the consequences of the global spread of English is its increased presence in the daily lives of many learners in living and studying in the 'expanding circle' (Kashru 1989). As a result, a growing number of young learners come to the classroom with a considerable language repertoire learnt from watching cartoons or playing computer games. While the issues of onset age and the length of exposure have been addressed in literature on instructed language learning, much less attention has been devoted to the influence of the contemporary media and cyber worlds on young learners of English. This report attempts to ascertain to what extent these worlds can promote particular kinds of learning in a particular educational context.

The talk presents the results of a case study of a successful young EFL learner. Starting from the theoretical tenets of the complexity theory, the study has explored the learner's engagement with the English language on a daily basis. Observations, audio recordings and interviews were taken over a six month period.

The first part of the talk analyzes strategies employed by the learner, and multi-mediated ways he has resorted to in interacting with various sign systems, such as cartoons, computer games, visited websites, magazines and trading cards. After that, the report outlines grammatical and vocabulary gains attributed to the learner's extracurricular engagement with English. Gains are established by comparing the learner's oral and written production with the input provided by the textbook used in regular school. The analysis has shown that most substantial improvements have been made in the areas of lexical and pragmatic competence.

These results raise interesting issues related to the use of technology in the context of foreign language learning. In the concluding part, the presenter explores how engagement strategies in the Information and Communication Technology rich environment can inform pedagogically grounded instructional design.