

ESOL and ICT

How can developing ICT skills benefit ESOL learning?

It is often argued that ICT is a powerful means of raising levels of adult literacy and numeracy. It is also claimed that learners who use ICT for functional skills can double the value of their study time by acquiring two sets of skills at the same time. But is there any evidence to support these claims? A study carried out for the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for Adult Literacy set out to find out. It also set out to identify effective ways of supporting the learning of other *Skills for Life*, at the same time as identifying effective ways of learning ICT skills.

The learners involved in this study improved in almost all cases in both literacy/ESOL skills and ICT skills, often to a statistically significant degree. But there were some differences between groups of learners. Age was a significant factor, with older learners making the least progress in ESOL skills. In terms of ICT skills and confidence, older men (though not women) made most progress. The study noted how learners who started out with lower ICT confidence were less likely to attend frequently and more likely to drop out. This highlighted the issue that, while ICT-based teaching can be very successful for many learners, some, for example those with low ICT confidence will be much less able to take advantage of the approach.

Individualised and collaborative working

The study found that classes where learners spent more time working individually tended to show better gains in ICT skills (although not ICT confidence) than those classes where more time was spent working in small groups. But collaboration was frequently observed to be effective too. What made the difference was whether collaborative work was due to the need to share technology or whether tutors had developed tasks requiring learners to work together. The latter was more successful than the former. When technology was simply shared, one person sometimes dominated its use, which undermined the usefulness of collaborative work for developing the learners' skills.

Encouraging independent learning

Teaching strategies that aimed to increase independent learning led to gains in both ICT skills and confidence. Encouraging learner independence gave teachers more time to get to know their learners, adapt their teaching to their learners' needs and manage classroom activities. The most effective teaching strategy for ESOL was 'Extending', where tutors built on or added to material they had introduced previously, or added to a comment made by a learner. Teaching activities associated with improvements in ICT skills were discussing, instructing, listening and modelling (showing the learner how to do something using the actual technology or an interactive whiteboard).

How was ICT used?

WebQuests – students were encouraged to experiment with computers and the internet and to turn to other students for help before the teacher. There was less paper-based teaching, and students were motivated by a need to improve language skills.

M-learning – using handheld computers with mobile phone and camera functionality to send text, images and sounds from various locations to a website, which learners edited themselves, thus working on both their ICT and language skills.

Digital video – using a digital video camera to create films. The interviews the learners carried out for the videoing were an important aspect of the work because they had to understand and respond to the answers of interviewees.

Take action

Could you

- Work together with colleagues to develop ICT tasks designed to develop language skills and *require* learners to work collaboratively together?
- Encourage independent learning, for example through expecting students to experiment with the technology and turn to each other for help before coming to you?

Evidence source

Mellar, H. *et al* (2007) Effective teaching and learning using ICT (NRDC)

http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=87