

March 01/interview

### ***Pete Sharma talks about language education and technology***

***Pete Sharma is an associate lecturer and works on the pre-sessional EAP courses at Warwick University. He is also the Director of Pete Sharma Associates (PSA), an educational consultancy and training organisation for language teachers. PSA runs courses worldwide for teachers of English as a Foreign Language, teacher trainers and academic managers on how to successfully integrate educational technology into their language courses. [www.psa.eu.com](http://www.psa.eu.com)***

***Pete Sharma was recently in Greece. He delivered a session on educational technology at the QLS Teachers' conference in Athens as well as at the Annual TESOL Greece Patras event last January.***

***ELT NEWS had the chance to talk to him.***

- **The exciting advances in educational technology have been so fast that many language teachers and institutions are struggling to keep up with the pace of change. Will technology ever replace teachers?**

“I don't think that technology will ever replace teachers. A lot of teachers know much- much more about technology than they feel they know. Teachers have e-mail addresses, search the internet for personal development or entertainment, watch videos, download documents, songs etc. Certainly there are things they do not know. OK. They should feel comfortable about this.

What concerns them most whenever they want to integrate technology into their teaching is the fear that technology might not work when they need it in the classroom. However the students are not so worried as the teacher might believe they are. It has happened to me many times: I enter a classroom I'd never been to before and the time I want to use the computer and the speakers, I find out that the speakers do not work. There is always one or two students who would come up, play with the speakers and fix them. So where is the problem?

Our job is not to teach technology; our job is to teach the language. Our job is to create conditions where the students can learn successfully. So we can relax a little bit and let our students deal with the situation when it arises.

However it is not an excuse to say ‘I do not use the technology because my students know more than me’.”

- **Some teachers say that they would like to learn the basics but do not have the time...Is it an excuse or laziness?**

“I do not think it is laziness. Teachers are among the hardest working people on the planet...It's very-very difficult to find time. However when there is a will, there is a way. Take myself, for instance. I didn't know how to type. Other people such as my wife went to a school and learnt but I didn't have time. One day I decided to word process my own documents. I was painfully slow in the beginning but I improved with time. The thing is that if you decide to do something specific, then it might be

possible. It is not necessary to learn everything. In most cases all we need to know is how to send and receive an email and attach a document.”

**• Teachers very often say that they find it difficult to locate information on the internet or decide what is suitable for classroom use with the plethora of sites that exist in the web.**

“It is true that there is an overload of information today but you can always ask other colleagues to give you the names of sites and web addresses they use. There is never a better time to work with your colleagues. You’ll see that you are not the only one who struggles to find the right path.”

**• Another excuse teachers use is that they have to follow a certain syllabus and that they are not allowed to deviate from this.**

“That’s a very good point. I must confess that my knowledge of how syllabi work is not so strong but I am discovering that this issue is coming up again and again. I have just come from India. The syllabus there is very strong. It takes students from A to B, from B to C etc. One thing that makes my heart heavy is when people say that they have to follow the syllabus. How did that syllabus ever come about? What kind of learning is it promoting? I understand that sometimes the syllabus promotes knowledge which is learnt by memory. It’s a great pity if there isn’t any choice in learning.

I’ll use Business English as a model. In Business English there is very little point in going to a students and say “Good morning. This is your syllabus.” It’s the other way around. You go to the students and say “Hello! Tell me what you need to do.” And the student tells you... “OK. Next week I am going to America and I need to give a presentation for 2 hours and I want you to help me”. Really at the end of the day that is the syllabus. It is focusing on presentation skills in the language the student needs.

I know that this model is less common in general English and in institutions that teach young learners but I think anybody who creates these kinds of things, follows a sequence which takes learners from A to B etc. The teacher who is trying to teach A may discover that the person sitting in front of him/her doesn’t learn what they are being taught. I remember my first lesson in German...there was a syllabus...and we had to learn the verb be and the first thing I wanted to say in German was that “I am Pete, I am from India and I am adopted”. Because that was me. The teacher wanted to find out about me. But the word ‘adopted’ was not in the syllabus. I managed to say to my teacher “My father is not my father...my mother is not my mother. I am...”. Then the teacher provided me with the missing word which likely is the same in both German and English. You cannot say to a student “I am very sorry...I am not going to teach you this today because this comes in week 7 next year.” I do not think we learn like that. There has to be flexibility.”

**• Usually teachers teach the way they were taught. Maybe they think that integrating technology into their teaching will make them lose the mantle of authority they have.**

“That’s a very good point. It’s natural to teach the way you were taught. However we need to realize that things change all the time. Somebody gave me a very good piece

of advice 'All teachers should learn something new.' I have taken yoga and I have discovered that every teacher starts the class in a different way. The first teacher said 'yoga is all about breathing'. I said 'OK. I can understand that'. The second teacher says 'yoga is about the spirit' and then a third teacher comes along, has a totally different massage and says that yoga is like aerobics. Suddenly you realize that yoga is a huge and complicated area. It reminds me of language teaching where the first teacher says 'Grammar is important'. The second teacher says 'Grammar is not important. The most important thing is vocabulary'. The third teacher comes and says 'Neither grammar nor vocabulary is important. The most important thing is chunks and collocations'. What teachers can do is to be open to learning and that helps a lot."

• **Does technology enhance motivation?**

"Technology can be motivating. And teachers can be motivating and it is often said that this is part of our role. I must confess that I've been very lucky because I teach students who are in the UK, they want to start university so they are highly motivated. I haven't met very challenging de-motivated students in my teaching career."

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Blogging Greece

It was great to go back to Greece after so many years - I was on the mainland a tourist over 20 years ago.

Last Saturday saw the QLS conference, held at the Pan-Hellenic school. I was slightly taken aback at the title: 'Hello Tech, bye teacher?' Luckily, the next line was reassuring: "Any teacher that can be replaced by a computer deserves to be", so I felt much better.

It was good to meet George Drivas who had kindly sent me a copy of his book: Education, Learning, Training in a Digital Society. George opened the conference with a talk based on his book; it was a good start to the day.

My own session provided 40 practical ideas for using technology in the classroom, although I actually only managed 36!

I enjoyed the whole day, including the talk by Anne Leventeris, from Burlington Books. She was showing us activities based on published digital materials, using a SMART board, and it was great to see the IWB used confidently and competently. The most spectacular moment of the day was actually realising where I was. We went up to the 8th floor for a wonderful view across Athens, taking in the Acropolis crowned by Parthenon.

We sped up to Patras to arrive at carnival time! It was good to be in the streets and see everyone enjoying themselves despite the challenging economic climate. TESOL Greece sure know how to provide a fab meal.

Sunday saw TESOL Greece, Patras. The event was live streamed. It was a wonderful day, with great presentations on Art and language teaching, psychology and being popular with students, and materials from *Heinle National Geographic* (I hope I got that right!).

A great trip. Thanks to everyone. I do hope to return to Greece again.