

The digital classroom: how technology is changing language teaching

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It is significant that the closing plenary session of the 20th IATEFL Poland Conference 2011 was about technology in language teaching. Educational technology is no longer a fringe course enhancement, of interest to only enthusiastic 'technophile' teachers, learners and managers, but rather, it has an importance for everyone concerned in language teaching.

The aim of the final session was to provide a concise overview of new technology in teaching. This talk provided the background to the area by making several statements about technology; some important common educational technologies were critically analysed; participants spent some time discussing some of the many controversies in this area and the session concluded with a number of practical teaching ideas.

Statements on technology

1) "The times they are a-changing...."

This is a time of significant change. Although Prensky's (2001) distinction between digital immigrants and digital natives is falling out of favour, it is nevertheless useful to help us see the way our younger students' minds work. Our children have, after all, grown up in the digital age; many have never known a world without the Internet.

The term Web 2.0 was used. It implies that the web is full of 'user-generated content' provided by the writers of blogs and wikis; communication across the web takes place with tools such as the now-familiar Skype. Today's course book is much more than a book; the term 'course book' can include regular e-lessons distributed across the web, web-based support materials, CD-ROM, podcasts and now, vodcasts or 'video podcasts'.

When discussing the diffusion of technologies, it is useful to consider Roger's well-known adoption curve. This can help you to decide whether your institution is an innovator, an early adopter of technology, part of the early majority or the late majority or (maybe even) a laggard.

2) Multiple perspectives

The area of TELL (technology-enhanced language learning) is highly controversial; there are so many ways of looking at technology in teaching. These may be described as 'multiple perspectives'. To illustrate 'switching perspectives', he gave the following example:

"I once asked a group of teachers in the UK what they thought about CD-ROMs. 'Not much' was their response. I posed the same question to group of English language teachers in Poland, learning Polish. Their response was overwhelmingly positive! Why? They were themselves using a beginners' disc to learn Polish: practising numbers, colours, the days of the week etc. They had simply 'switched perspective', in this case, from 'teacher' to 'learner'. As language learners, the teachers recognised CD-ROM is a valuable learning tool.

Perspectives include the following: theoretical, teacher, learner, teacher trainer, Director of studies / academic manager, school manager, publisher, instructional designer. Not surprisingly, arguments arise as stakeholders tend to look at technology from their own particular viewpoint.

3) Technology has changed the teaching and learning of languages forever

Even if computers themselves are not used within a given educational context, they have provided insights into the way language works. In the area of vocabulary, for example, concordancers

(powerful search tools used to analyse texts) have given corpus linguists new insights into 'collocation' and 'word frequency', and revolutionised how course books are written. ELT authors use concordances to provide example sentences of real language, as opposed to inventing unrealistic dialogues, as was common thirty years ago.

Technology has opened up a wider range of course options, often for people who previously could not take a face-to-face course due to distance, or inconvenient class times. Increasing numbers of language learners are choosing to take online language courses. The concept of online teaching is broad, ranging from the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for course delivery at a university to desktop video-conferencing with Skype, not to mention teaching in a virtual world. Language Lab is an example of a virtual school operating in the virtual world Second Life.

4) CALL as situation-specific

Levy and Stockwell state that CALL (computer-aided language learning) is 'situation-specific'. This means a particular solution which works well in one institution may have little or no relevance to another organisation (or freelance teacher) down the road

5) The importance of attitude

Using technology involves both knowledge about the tools ("What is an interactive whiteboard?") and hands-on skills in the classroom (actually using the board in a lesson). But how do you feel about using IWB's? In addition to knowledge and skills, it has been said (Freeman:1989) that it is your attitude which determines whether the input derived from training in technology will produce change in teaching practice. Teachers positive about using technologies in language teaching are already using them!

6) The importance of pedagogy

No matter how enthusiastic one might be about technology, teachers do (and should) look beyond the 'wow' factor, to what pedagogical benefits are to be gained in the classroom. One effect of using a blended learning approach is that teachers can decide which activities are more appropriately done in the classroom (such as discussion) and which might be done on the platform (practising discrete items of grammar, for example).

A critical analysis of six technologies

Let's take a look at six technologies which are current, useful and interesting: podcasts, interactive whiteboards, blogs, wikis, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE's) and M-learning.

1) Podcasts

A podcast is an audio file that is made available on the Internet for download and playback using a computer or a mobile device such as an iPod. Because podcasts can be easily copied to an mp3 player, they allow for listening 'on the move'. There are a wide range of different kinds of podcast; many course book CVD-ROMs now include mp3 files. Teachers and students can even create their own podcasts.

2) Interactive whiteboards

How would you describe the penetration of interactive whiteboards in Poland? Research (Schmid: 2009) has shown that with an IWB, memorable presentations are possible, using the screen reveal tool. Similarly, lesson review is easy, since the teacher has access to all the flip-charts created in any given lesson.

There are many issues connected to the IWB. Perhaps the most frequently-cited objection is that of cost. The IWB is sometimes criticised for hastening the return to the teacher-centred classroom. Of course, it doesn't have to; it just depends on how it is used.

3) Blogs

Blogs started life as on-line diaries, originally maintained by an individual. Today, there are corporate bloggers, and most ELT publishers have their own blog. Blogs can include graphics and video. Blog entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. Teachers can give student feedback using their own blog; some students have a blog in English (or the target language). Class blogs are often highly-motivating as they can offer students a chance to display their work for a wide range of readers. One issue connected with blogs is whether or not teachers should correct student entries, and how.

4) Wikis

A wiki is a collaborative website that allows the easy creation and editing of any number of interlinked web pages. The most famous wiki is, of course, Wikipedia. Wikis can be useful when studying collaborative writing, the teacher can click on the history button to see changes. However, it is important to remember that not all students are happy with the idea of collaborating with peers on areas such as accuracy, and prefer input and feedback to be directly from the teacher.

5) Virtual Learning Environments

A Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) is a "a collection of integrated tools enabling the management of online learning, providing a delivery mechanism, student tracking, assessment and access to resources" (JISC infoNet). Moodle and Blackboard are examples of VLE's. A VLE contains communication tools such as a bulletin board, quizzes and tracking tools. VLEs are commonly used in universities to supplement traditional face-to-face classroom activities, commonly known as Blended Learning (Sharma: 2010).

6) M-learning

M-learning stands for mobile learning. One definition, taken from wikipedia, is "learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies". There are many different contexts for m-learning, from the classroom (using Smartphones for research) to receiving an 'e-mail of the day'.

In terms of hardware, the term m-learning can be used to refer to a range of devices such as: Mobile-phone / Smart-phone; iPod / iPod touch / mp3 player; laptop / notebook / netbook; Tablet PC / iPad / Samsung Galaxy; E-book reader. Sometimes, the term is used to include Learner Response Devices (used to vote in class) and electronic translators. The current discussion on M-Learning seems to revolve around the appearance of 'apps' or applications; these include ELT apps, for grammar practice, dictionary apps and real world apps.

Controversies

There are innumerable controversies in this area. Here are just a few:

Will the course book disappear?

Should schools buy an IWB?

Should students have their mobile phones switched off in class?

Should students use electronic translators in class?

Should classroom learners be supported with VLE's?

Should teachers use YouTube in their teaching?

Practical teaching ideas

Innovative teachers are constantly seeking new and interesting ways to teach language areas such as grammar, vocabulary and the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Grammar

A teacher using an interactive whiteboard can apply the "Infinite clone tool" to an image, so they can instantly clone it (copy it) as many times as they wish. One practical teaching idea is to apply the clone tool to a smiley face and an unhappy face. The teacher displays a number of sentences, some correct and others incorrect. Students then drag the smiley face or the unhappy face to each sentence, depending on whether they think it is right or wrong. This type of interactive exercise can encourage an 'awareness-raising' approach to grammar.

Vocabulary

The website Wordle allows teachers to select text and paste it into the box in order to generate a 'word cloud'. The 'word cloud' is based on word frequency, with the most frequently-occurring words appearing larger. This is a great way to generate interest in a text, or to review it later.

Listening

The website TED.com contains a vast number of talks on technology, education and design. Many talks are accompanied by an interactive transcript, so students can listen and follow the presentation at the same time. By clicking on one sentence in the transcript, they can go directly to this part of the presentation.

Reading

One practical idea is to annotate a text using the IWB pens. Firstly, students read the text in their course book. In what has become known as 'head-up' learning, the teacher using courseware running through an IWB can bring up the same text on-screen and enlarge it. The text can then be annotated on-screen, using the pen tools and / or the highlighter. For example, the teacher may wish to focus on instances of the simple past tense, so students can come out and highlight any instances of past regulars in one colour, and irregulars in another. The teacher can elicit whole class approval, additions or corrections.

Speaking

Learner Voting Devices can be used in conjunction with an interactive whiteboard. The voting can be anonymous, and can produce the excitement of the well-known programme 'Who wants to be a millionaire'. Voting devices can be used in quizzes, grammar review, and fluency.

Writing

Teachers can support their writing course using a class wiki. These can be set up quite quickly and like blogs, there are many free services. The wiki enables students to collaborate on writing a text at a distance, between classes.

The plenary session provided a lead-in to a more practical ideas exchange workshop, as well as producing food for thought for the closing panel discussion.

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Bio

Pete Sharma is a Director of Pete Sharma Associates Ltd, a consultancy and training organisation which runs workshops in educational technology: www.psa.eu.com He worked for many years in business English and is currently a part-time lecturer in EAP (*English for Academic Purposes*) at Warwick University, UK. Pete reviews ELT materials in the *EL Gazette*. He is a regular conference presenter, and has given talks around the world on technology at IATEFL, BESIG and TESOL conferences . As an author, Pete has co-written books on technology in language teaching, including: *Blended Learning: using technology in and beyond the language classroom* (Macmillan 2007). He has written multimedia content for Macmillan's *In Company* and *The Business* series. Pete is a committee member of the Learning Technologies SIG of IATEFL. His latest book as co-author is: *400 Ideas for Interactive Whiteboards*, Macmillan (2011).