

Workshop

Enhancing classroom language learning through technology: ideas in practice

Pete Sharma

This workshop was a follow-up to the plenary session on technology. It was divided into four parts. Firstly, we looked at the range of technology available for the teaching and learning of languages; then, Pete mentioned some new developments; some time was given to discussing the controversial issues raised in the plenary session; and finally, Pete presented a range of practical teaching ideas, as illustrated on the accompanying PowerPoint.

Part one: new technology in language teaching

Participants received a mind map showing a range of different technologies. The mind map was supposed to be fairly comprehensive, without necessarily being exhaustive. It can be added to and updated by individuals.

The technologies mentioned on the mind map were:

CD ROM / DVD ROMs / Multi-Roms

Mobile learning: SmartPhone / Mobile phones / mp3 players / E-book readers / podcasts / vodcasts

Computer-mediated communication: VLE e.g. Blackboard / Moodle / LMS (Learning management system) / CMS (Content management system) / English360 / Macmillan English Campus / Chat / Forums

Online language teaching / Virtual classroom

Authoring tools / Hot potatoes / Video-editing / Mind map software

Screen capture software

Internet / world wide web / Authentic materials / ELT materials

Electronic dictionaries / CD-ROM / DVD-ROM / Concordancers

Handheld electronic dictionaries

Office software: Word /PowerPoint

Interactive whiteboards (IWBs) / Portable IWBs / Learner response devices

Virtual Worlds / Second Life

Games / simulations

Testing / on-line tests / adaptive tests / Test creation software

Web 2.0: Blogs / Micro-blogging - Twitter / Wikis

Personal learning Environment

Participants were given time to study the Mind Map. If anything was unknown, participants could ask each other a 'What' question. For example: "What's a concordancer"? After establishing 'what' a technology is, it is always useful to examine 'why' it may be of use. What added value does it bring to teaching and learning?

Information on the technologies mentioned above can be found in Blended Learning (Sharma and Barrett) and in the various free updates on the Internet.

Part two: recent developments in technology

One of the most interesting recent developments is English360. This web-based platform consists of digital authoring tools, enabling a business English provider (school or freelance teacher) to create and deliver a blended course by combining publisher-produced material, authentic material from the Internet or provided by the student, and teacher-created material. This makes perfect sense to those teachers who for years have used a 'cut and paste'

approach to assemble an ESP course driven by students' needs. The digital authoring tools are relatively easy to use. One huge benefit of this platform is that the material looks as if it comes from the 'same stable' rather than being 'cobbled together'. Pete stated that he felt English360 represents a significant advance in the creation and delivery of blended courses for business English.

Pete briefly mentioned some of the most recent developments in terms of hardware and software. The iPad is a good example of a new piece of hardware. The launch of the iPad has generated an interest in tablets, with competitor products coming on to the market, such as the Samsung Galaxy. There has also been a noticeable recent rise in interest in e-book readers, such as Amazon's Kindle and Sony's e-book reader, partly fired by falling prices and also by a noticeable increase in the readability of digital ink.

Publishers are constantly bringing out whiteboardable versions of course books, sometimes called 'courseware'. The audio transcript can be displayed and specific sentences of the listening can be played at will, at the touch of the e-pen or finger. This is significantly different from having to find the place on the cassette tape, or playing a recording from the start on a CD-audio and provides a good pedagogical reason for considering using this feature of the technology with learners.

Part three: practical teaching ideas

Grammar

For a long time now, students have had access to interactive exercises on the web. Analytical learners especially benefit from practising grammar whenever and wherever they wish, and receiving immediate electronic feedback. On language learning CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs, feedback is devised for the self study student, and shows if an answer is 'right' or 'wrong'. Pete pointed out that with an IWB, it is possible to deal with greyer areas of language that have not been addressed in digital materials. This is because in some IWB exercises, the answer is not necessarily automatically shown. The teacher is involved in the learning equation, and can ask someone in the class to come out show his or her answer. If someone else disagrees, they can come out and change the answer, initiating classroom discussion. Pete presented some ideas from his new book, 400 Ideas for interactive whiteboards.

In 'Grammar matrix' students decide if they hate or love grammar, and if they know a lot or a little about it. They then write their names in the appropriate 'quadrant'. The teacher can draw circles around clusters of names situated in one section of the whiteboard. The class profile provided by the 'grammar matrix' can then inform the course, and the original flipchart can be revisited at the end of the course to see if the students views have changed.

In 'Likely / unlikely language' the teacher prepares a flipchart with a cline with the following points: correct / likely / incorrect / unlikely, and a list of sentences: correct, incorrect and 'unlikely language' (which might be said in some instances). The students read the sentences and decide if they are correct, incorrect or unlikely. They come out to the whiteboard and drag each sentence to one position on the cline. The teacher then checks if the class agrees, and monitors any resulting discussion.

Vocabulary

Pete mentioned that there are many interesting ways to store vocabulary. These include a free app from the British Council called MyWordBook; the Macmillan English Campus; and the Macmillan English Dictionary for the iPhone and the iPad.

Students can guess the frequency of certain words, using a system such as the star system in the Macmillan English Dictionary. This activity, which raises awareness of the importance of word frequency in deciding which words to study, can be adapted to other learner dictionary systems.

When using courseware on an interactive whiteboard, a teacher can add post-it notes onto any page. The example in the accompanying PowerPoint is from *New Inside Out Digital* (Macmillan).

Listening

As mentioned in the plenary, podcasts allow learners to listen on the move; digital sliders allow them to pause whenever they like, and in this way they can control the input, repeating sections as and when necessary. Choice is important. For example, students can choose whether to listen to video clips with or without subtitles.

Reading

The web provides a giant repository of authentic texts for ESP (English for Special Purposes) learners, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and of course, business English. ELT material such as e-lessons can be distributed easily as .pdfs across the Internet. (See PPT)

Speaking

Teachers with an interactive whiteboard have access to the software which comes with the board. The range of software is extraordinary, and includes pictures, time-lines, diagrams and maps. When starting off a new multi-national group, a teacher can ask students in turn to write their name and hometown on a map. This can be printed off at the end of the lesson and distributed to the students.

Writing

The PPT shows the wiki Pete set up to support one of his writing classes at Warwick University, and a diagram which can be used on an interactive whiteboard to demonstrate the cyclical nature of process writing.

Phonology

Teachers can use the interactive phonemic chart in a language lesson to model pronunciation. The students can download this free chart to their computers, or mobile phones. The British Council app of the phonemic chart is also free.

Games

Younger learners in particular love playing digital language games and teachers are happy to see them so engaged, motivated and recycling the target language. The games on NIOD (see PPT) can be customised by teachers.

Further practical ideas:

Blended Learning: using technology in and beyond the language classroom (Pete Sharma and Barney Barrett) Macmillan 2007

400 Ideas for Interactive Whiteboards (Pete Sharma, Francis Jones and Barney Barrett)
Macmillan 2011.