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Bringing technology to real life

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Abstract:

Technology has its place in language teaching yet its effective integration remains to puzzle many. This article provides an overview of considerations for successful integration of technology and outlines criteria for designing effective language activities around technology.

## ***Introduction***

We might be technophobes, technogeeks, or people between these two. Personally, I would not call myself a technogeek, but I have always been drawn to new technology. I am fascinated about the new possibilities it offers and its exciting potential for our common lives as well as education. But no matter how each of us, especially those of us who are educators, feels about technology, we have to accept that “technology is at the heart of education now” as Scrivener (2011, p.335) writes. In fact, the number of acronyms used when referring to the use of technology in language teaching (such as CALL, CELL, TELL, MALL etc.) suggests that technology and language teaching have become strongly intertwined. Because of this undeniable reality and push for integration of technology in classes among educators, technology can sometimes be used just for the sake of being used without teachers having a clear purpose for its integration – a purpose driven by their teaching goals. Consequently, the potential of technology for language teaching may not be fully explored and its benefits for language teaching and learning stay hidden to teachers and learners. In this article, I address this challenge and examine conditions to be met to integrate technology effectively and efficiently into our language instruction to actually enhance language learning.

## ***Possibilities and realities***

The list of key technologies and tools for educational purposes is rather extensive. It includes items ranging from software such as offline and online applications, multimedia resources, video and computer games to hardware such as computers, netbooks, tablets, interactive whiteboards (IWBs), mobile and smart phones,

handheld game stations, mp4 players, and e-readers. The possibilities of these resources are numerous and almost unlimited. However, it cannot be denied that many teachers are caught at the crossroad of technology and language learning and do not know which direction to take to effectively integrate technology into their classes language classes. For example, the Czech national school inspection report for the academic year 2011-2012 (Česká školní inspekce, 2013) provides data on the rather sporadic use of technology in language classes in the Czech Republic. It was observed that in lower-secondary schools (11-15 year old students), 67.5% of the reviewed language lessons had no information and communication technologies (ICT) and 15.5% of the reviewed lessons included ICT for presentations of contents. In upper-secondary schools (15-19 year old students), 77% of the reviewed lessons had not ICT, with only 18% of the reviewed lessons including ICT for presentations of contents and 2% of the reviewed lessons including activities designed around ICT.

It is without any question that technology provides us with a wide range of learning and teaching tools. So theoretically, we should see language teachers teaching with, through, and around computer technologies and we should see language learners learning language with, through and around computer technologies, but the realities are different. Peachey (2012) in his article "Technology can sometimes be wasted on English language teaching" discusses this very same issue and states: "We are now 12 years into the new millennium and technology has become a prime element of almost all English language teaching (ELT) conferences and journals around the world. Yet, when we look for real improvements in student performance and effective use of technology by teachers, I think that the results are pretty disappointing."

In many ways, this reality bears some similarities with the time when video materials became available for language teaching. It seems that video pretty much struggled to be effectively integrated with already available resources and coursebooks. Many strived to exploit video materials to support students' language learning and turned to using video to "spark" their lessons and motivate students without pursuing the teaching potential it can bring to language learning. It is very possible that in some contexts, it is still the reality and language teachers fail to fully benefit from this tool. We find comparable behavior with technology. In any case, the fact is that any new tool that becomes available to educators becomes a technical and pedagogical challenge and requires us to transform our teaching practices.

### ***Pedagogy***

When technology becomes a classroom tool it has to be justified and guided by principles of effective language pedagogy just like any other tool or resource in language instruction. Specifically, Brett & Gonzales-Lloret (2011) argue that "the use of technology should be approached in much the same way as any other technique or tool, i.e. for its effectiveness for language learning"(p.353) and further add that "the use that we make of [computers] must invariably be related to the language classroom syllabus, the methodological and pedagogical principles adopted, and student needs" (p.366). Similarly, Scrivener (2011) talks about aim-driven use of technology and the need to carefully consider how we use it in order to improve teaching and learning (p.335).

Literature on CALL often refers to the list of eight optimal conditions for language learning compiled by Egbert, Chao & Hanson-Smith (1999) and based on research in second language acquisition, English language learning, and learning in general.

The authors suggest that these general conditions guide teachers in their integration of technology in language instruction. Thus when we design tasks with, around, and through technology, we should make sure that learners:

1. interact and negotiate meaning;
2. interact in English with engaged peers/audience;
3. perform authentic tasks;
4. are exposed to English and produce varied and creative language;
5. have sufficient time to complete tasks and receive appropriate feedback;
6. understand the purpose of the task and know how to do it;
7. work in non-threatening atmosphere;
8. are autonomous. (pp. 3-7)

The conditions provide one possible set of guidelines for examining our intent to integrate technology to enhance language learning. In other words, we can ask ourselves whether the technology tool and related task/s will meet these conditions when implemented and thus lead to language acquisition.

Another set of guidelines is offered by Egbert (2005). Egbert, based on her review of literature on technology in education, synthesizes five basic guidelines for using technology successfully in language classes. First, she states that technology has to support our teaching goals. We should not use it because it is convenient or

available, but our use should be determined by our teaching goals. Second, technology has to allow a variety and choice so differences among students and their unique needs are addressed. Third, we should not give technology more credit than it really deserves. We should not think that technology is a teacher when it is only a tool. Fourth, technology should be used effectively, which means that it should allow learners to learn English better and faster than they would learn English without it and with the resources they normally have available. Fifth, technology should be used efficiently. In other words, it should allow teachers and learners to meet their goals with less time and work. It should be a time and energy saver. Egbert concludes her overview by stating that “how these guidelines play out, however, will differ according to not only the course’s content, but also to other contextual features such as grade level, student proficiency level, and curricular goals”(p. 366).

Yet another way to examine our use of technology is through Ur’s (2012) principles of activity design that results in good learning: validity, quantity, success-orientation, heterogeneity, and interest (pp. 43-45). She calls an activity a valid one when it actually allows learners to engage in the development of language knowledge or skills that are meant to be practiced. For example, learners do not spend time searching for a reading text online when the teaching goal is to develop reading skills. The principle of quantity is followed when the activity allows learners to engage with as much English as possible. It maximizes everybody’s participation. For instance, IWBs are a very good tool. However, if only one or two students are engaged in an activity with it and the others passively observe them, then its use decreases possible class time during which students could engage with English. An activity that challenges learners but also allows them to succeed meets the success-

orientation principle. The principle of heterogeneity is carried out in an activity that allows learners of different levels to get engaged. In such an activity, weaker learners receive support whereas the stronger learners experience the right level of challenge. Last, for an activity to result in learning, the activity should drive learners' interest. They are simply interested in performing the task.

Enlisting possible frameworks of effective pedagogy and language pedagogy could continue; however, at this point, I believe the above described three sets of considerations/principles combined provide a rather firm base for guiding us in our initial decision making process about technology tools. Let's walk now through one activity with two different sets of tools – traditional and online - and see which one offers more to our language classes.

### ***Activity***

Creating acrostic poems is a common writing activity in language classes. Learners write simple or more advanced poems around a specific topic word. The actual poem uses the letters of this topic word to begin individual lines of the poem. Then each of these lines then somehow describes the topic word. Here is an example of a poem about the Spanish city of Sevilla:

SEVILLA

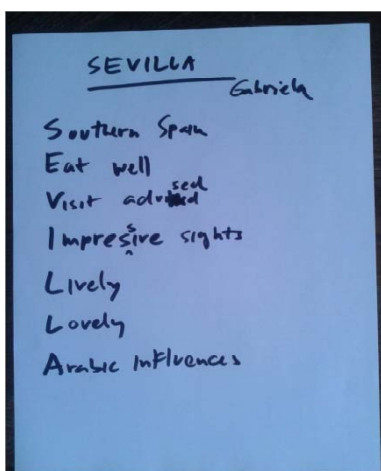
**S**outhern Spain

**E**at well



Visit advised  
 Impressive sights  
 Lively  
 Lovely  
 Arabic influences

Traditionally, this activity is done with pen and paper. Learners look at examples of acrostic poems and discuss and define its features. Then they are either given a topic word or identify a topic word of their own choice. After that, they are encouraged to think of a word, phrase, or sentence beginning with the individual letters of the topic word. They are told that they should think of expressions that relate to, describe, or show their knowledge of or attitude towards the topic word and write these until all the letters of the topic word have an expression. The final product may look like *Figure 1*. Ultimately, learners can share their poems in groups, post their poems around the classroom and do a poem gallery walk and so forth (Holmes & Moulton, 2001).



*Figure 1.* Handwritten poem

The same activity can be done with the use of modern technology. The ReadWriteThink.org<sup>1</sup> website offers an online interactive tool that can be used for writing acrostic poems. The process of doing the writing activity is similar to the pen and paper one; however, instead of a teacher, the tool guides learners step by step through the writing process (ReadWriteThink, 2010).

First, learners discover what an acrostic poem is and see an example of a short poem (*Figure 2 & 3*). Second, they enter their name and their topic word (*Figure 4*). Third, they brainstorm words associated with the topic word. They are advised to put down any word related to the topic but also words that start with the letters of the topic word (*Figure 5*). After this preparation, they start writing their poem. A prompt reminds them again that their poem should be about the topic word and that they should refer to their brainstormed list of words as they write the poem (*Figure 6*). If they cannot think of a word, they can click on the letter of their topic word and are provided with some general hint words (*Figure 7*). Once they complete their poem, they can review their product. Then they can print it, email it to someone, or save it (*Figure 8*). They can also save their work throughout the writing process. Similarly to the previous version of the activity, learners can share their poems in groups, post their poems around the classroom and do a poem gallery walk and so forth.

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<sup>1</sup> ReadWriteThink.org is a nonprofit website maintained by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, with support from the Verizon Foundation.



Figure 2. Introductory page



Figure 3. Explanation



Figure 4. Information about the poem



Figure 5. Brainstorming expressions



Figure 6. Composing process



Figure 7. Hint words



Figure 8. Final product

If we had equal access to pen and paper, and computers, which one of the two possible versions of the activities would be the right one for language teaching at the technologically advanced times? Should we use the traditional technology of pen and paper to do an acrostic poem or should we use the modern technology - an online tool to do it? Does it really matter which one we actually use? We might be leaning towards the online tool because it looks cooler and different and because we understand that technology in teaching increases motivation. But in my opinion, there is no straightforward answer to these questions as we can identify some advantages and disadvantages in each version of the activity. The time demands of the activity, the steps of the activity, the skills being practiced, the amount of scaffolding for the learners, the look of the final product, the role of the teacher, the role of the learner – they all vary.

So how do we decide then? Answering this question takes us back to the principles of effective practices outlined above. We cannot decide on pen and paper or online tool unless we scrutinize our teaching scenario. We need to examine closely our specific teaching situation and our teaching goal/s and decide which version of the

activity better fits our particular teaching context. To improve our language teaching and students' learning, we need to justify our choice with reference to principles of effective language pedagogy. Here I offer some guiding questions we can ask ourselves when we intend to exploit technology in our classes in order to support language learning:

1. What are my teaching goals?
2. What are the best resources to meet these teaching goals?
3. Will the use of technology make learning English better or faster than the use of other tools?
4. Will the use of technology allow less time and work for teachers and learners?
5. Considering the various constraints, will the activity have a learning value?

I suggest that we don't use modern technology simply because it is "hype and in." I suggest that we carefully examine our motives and rationale for using modern technology with language learners. I suggest that we ask ourselves the five questions given above. We may, to our surprise, learn that our answers are not in favor of technology. Consequently, we can use tools that we have always used and focus on using them successfully. We aren't required to face the challenge of a new tool whose learning value is not guaranteed. On the other hand, if our answers are in favor of technology, we should exploit the tool through careful planning procedures. We should sensibly design the activity/task with, through, or around the tool and identify specific language content, preparation for the task, steps of the task, instructions, organization, and feedback (Scrivener, 2011). We should basically

follow the same planning framework we are familiar with from planning our language instruction and do our best to exploit the potential of the tool.

### ***Conclusion***

To conclude the discussion on how to integrate technology effectively and efficiently into our language instruction, I would like to refer back to Brett & Gonzales (2011) who state, “There is no doubt that technology can help enhance the quality of input, and the authenticity of resources, provide relevant and useful feedback, connect students with remote audiences, and train them in the use of technological advances that are fundamental skills in everyday life. Technology is, however, no more and no less than the use practitioners and learners make of it” (p. 351).

Simply said, technology is just another classroom tool whose teaching potential is closely tied to what we do with it. If we understand and implement effective language teaching pedagogy in our non-technology classes, we should not be afraid of adding another tool to our list of resources. I am not saying that it does not take time to get familiar and comfortable with a new technology tool and learn to use it well, but I strongly believe that being skilled in effective language teaching principles and practices is more crucial for exploiting technology tools than the actual technical skills associated with the tool.

Although we may sometimes get the impression that technology has supernatural powers, it does not. It is a tool like any other tool we already use, as Hockly (2011) argued in the *ELT Journal/IATEFL Debate in Brighton* in 2011: “Depending on

context and how it's used, technology can be effective or not, just like any other teaching tool." We need to understand, according to Brett & Gonzales-Lloret (2011), that "computers are not a miracle tool to solve problems in curriculum development or to fill gaps in the pedagogic design of language classrooms" (p. 366). The success of technology in language teaching is predetermined by effective pedagogy. It is not that much about what we use, but how we use it. Only when effective language teaching methodology frames the use of technology, then technology can be brought to real life in our language classes.

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