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TECHNOLOGY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Technology in language teaching is not new. Indeed, technology has been around in language teaching for decades – one might argue for centuries, if we classify the blackboard as a form of technology. Tape recorders, language laboratories and video have been in use since the 1960s and 1970s, and are still used in classrooms around the world.

Computer-based materials for language teaching, often referred to as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), appeared in the early 1980s. Early Call programs typically required learners to respond to stimuli on the computer screen and to carry out tasks such as filling in gapped texts, matching sentence halves and doing multiple-choice activities. Probably one of the best-known early CALL activities is that of text reconstruction, where an entire text is blanked out and the learner recreates it by typing in words. For all of these activities the computer then offer the learner feedback, ranging from simply pointing out whether the answer is correct or incorrect to providing more sophisticated feedback, such as showing why the learner is mistaken and offering remedial activities. The CALL approach is one that is still found on many published CD-ROMs for language teaching.

As access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has become more widespread, so CALL has moved beyond the use of computer programs to embrace the use of the Internet and web-based tools. The term TELL (Technology Enhanced Language Learning) appeared in the 1990s, in response to the growing possibilities offered by the Internet and communications technology.

Although the use of ICT by language teachers is still not widespread, the use of technology in the classroom is becoming increasingly important, and it will become a normal part of ELT practice in the coming years. There are many reasons for this:

- Internet access – either in private homes or at Internet cafes – is becoming increasingly available to learners.

- Younger learners are growing up with technology, and it is a natural and integrated part of their lives. For these learners the use of technology is a way to bring the outside world into the classroom. And some of these younger learners will in turn become teachers themselves.

- English, as an international language, is being used in technologically mediated contexts.

- Technology, especially the Internet, presents us with new opportunities for authentic tasks and materials, as well as access to a wealth of ready-made ELT materials.

- The Internet offers excellent opportunities for collaboration and communication between learners who are geographically dispersed.

- Technology is offered with published materials such as coursebook and resource books for teachers.

- Learners increasingly expect language schools to integrate into teaching.

- Technology offers new ways for practising languages and assessing performance.

- Technology is becoming increasingly mobile. It can be used not only in the classroom, lecture hall, computer room or self-access centre, it can also be used at home, on the way to school and in Internet cafes.

- Using a range of ICT tools can give learners exposure to and practice in all of the four main language skills – speaking, listening, writing and reading.

The contexts in which teachers are working with technology can vary widely, and the access that teachers have to computers - the so-called digital divide - will affect what we can do with our classes in terms of implementing technology. A general lack of ICT training for teachers also means that we still have some way to go until the normalisation of technology in language teaching, where the use of technology in teaching becomes as natural as the use of books or pens and paper.

Attitudes to technology. Many people are afraid of new technology, and, with increasing presence of the Internet and computers, the term technophobe has appeared to refer to those of us who might be wary of these new developments. More

recently, the term digital native has been coined to refer to someone who grows up using technology, and who thus feels comfortable and confident with it – typically today's children. Their parents, on the other hand, tend to be digital immigrants, who have come late to the world of technology, if at all. In many cases, teachers are the digital immigrants and our younger students are the digital natives.

A large part of the negative attitudes teachers have towards technology is usually the result of a lack of confidence, a lack of facilities or a lack of training, resulting in an inability to see the benefit of using technologies in the classrooms. It is also often the case that teachers may not be fully in control of their work situation. A teacher may want to use more technology in their teaching, but the school may not have the facilities, or, on the other hand, a teacher may be instructed to start using technology for which they feel unprepared or untrained.

You will also need some essential equipment in order to get the most out of this book, and to start to implement technology with your learners:

- ✓ at least one computer (preferably one per two students);
- ✓ an Internet connection;
- ✓ a printer;
- ✓ an audio card in the computer, and a headset (audio and microphone) for every computer;
- ✓ basic software (a word processing program, a web browser like Internet Explorer, Firefox or Mozilla, and an email program).

Using websites is one of the easiest and least stressful ways of getting started with technology in the classroom. There is a large and constantly expanding collection of resources on the web, at a variety of levels and covering an amazing array of topics. You can choose from authentic (written for Internet surfers in general) sources or ELT-specific sites (made by, and for, teachers), monolingual or multilingual sites, sites with multimedia, or just simple text, for those on slower connections.

The web is a source of content which can be used as a window on the wider world outside your class, and is – of course – a readily available collection of

authentic material. As such, it is a much larger repository of content than would previously have been readily available to you and your students.

The technology needed to use the Internet for teaching is relatively limited and the chances of something going wrong are greatly reduced over-more complex technology approaches such as attempting to carry out live or video-conferencing sessions.

Another advantage of this tool is that you do not necessarily have to rely on a constant Internet connection if you bear in mind that it is possible to save local copies of websites on your computer, or print out potentially useful pages for later use. Indeed, you can use web pages in the classroom in a variety ways:

- as printed pages, with no computer. Although printing is not necessarily the cheapest option, it is certainly a viable one in places where there may be limited access to the Internet.

- with one computer with an Internet connection. This can be enhanced by connecting the computer to a data projector or even an interactive whiteboard, allowing for greater visibility in class, but it is also possible to make use of a single computer on its own connected to the Internet for reference.

- in a computer lab with a set of networked and connected computers.

How to find useful websites. As already mentioned, the Internet is a vast repository of information and resources, and it is perhaps exactly this range that makes it seem, at first, daunting and unapproachable to most teachers.

For teachers, having good search skills means finding useful resources quickly, speeding up lesson planning and facilitating web use in class. For learners, it means being able to quickly accomplish web-based tasks, thus ensuring that the technology enhances the learning experience rather than impeding it. It makes sense, then, both to acquire these skills, and to spend some time sharing them with your learners.

There are three basic ways of searching on the Internet, and we will briefly describe them below, and look at way of making searches more targeted and efficient.

Planning lessons using the Internet. The first thing, of course, is to plan your session well: visit the websites you intend to use and make sure you know your way

around them properly. Try to use sites which appear to have a potentially long “shelf life” – ones made by large institutions and commercial organizations, rather than personal homepages, which have a tendency to come and go with alarming frequency.

Planning a web-based lesson, rather than one where the web content plays an ancillary role is not intrinsically different from planning a more traditional one. We like to divide a typical web-based session into three parts (www): warmer, web, what next.

The warmer part of the lesson is the kind of thing we all do as a matter of course, with introductory activities, interest-generating ideas, and so on. This part prepares your learners for what they are going to be doing in the web part of the lesson. Our view is that this part of the lesson is best done in the familiar environment of the normal classroom.

In the web section of the lesson, it’s important to spend only as much as you need working with the computers. We prefer to take learners to a computer room for this part rather than spend the entire class in there. This has the double advantage of allowing more groups to use the room and of keeping learners focused during their time there. It is also an opportunity for learners to stretch their legs and provides a change of pace. On the other hand, moving from the traditional classroom to a computer room does have the potential to disrupt your class, so careful planning of the logistics may be necessary.

If you have limited access to computers, or perhaps only one computer in the classroom, you can print off the web-based materials you want to use with your learners in advance, and simply use a print version. This is, of course, not as exciting as using computers themselves, but can bring the Internet into more resource-poor environments.

Of course, there are certain teaching situations where teachers are obliged to take their learners to a computer facility for one or more lessons per week. If you do find yourself in this position, you can adapt your lesson plans to make greater use of the Internet than we are suggestion here.

You may even choose to incorporate the use of websites more consistently into the curriculum of the course you are teaching – perhaps substituting a part of the course materials you are using for websites, for example the reading texts or the listening material. However you decide to do this, it must be a transparent process that has gone into this decision, but also the relevance and value of the change. This can be achieved in part by helping learners to cast a critical eye the materials they work in class, and encouraging them to talk about what they like doing and what they don't.

It should also be born in mind that your learners will have favourite websites of their own, and it is well worth investigating whether these can be incorporated into your classroom teaching, partly as a motivator, but also as a link to their lives, interests and experiences outside the class. This again will help them to see the value of the technology applied in class.

It's worth remembering that once you put people behind computer monitors, it's easy for them to forget that you are there and – more importantly – why they are there. So the two vital words here are time and task. Make sure your learners have a clearly-defined task to achieve and a clearly-define time frame in which to achieve it.

Once the group has got what you intended from the computers, it's time to move them back to the classroom for what next stage of the lesson. This part should deal with the tasks set for the web part and then proceed with more familiar follow-up activities to round off the lessons.

Movie stars are a sample lessons plan based on this structure. You can use this as a template for your own planning. It is worth noting that there is nothing intrinsically different from the more traditional course book approach here – perhaps the major value of this material is its intrinsic motivational element: real actors being interviewed for a real programme. This, plus the contemporary nature of most website content, makes the web an ideal source of materials.