



TECHNOLOGY AND EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

How can technology be used to contribute to the effectiveness of language teaching/learning?

Whether you are aware of it or not, there is something of a revolution going on in language learning. While its full effects are yet to be seen, the link between technology and language learning is developing at an ever increasing speed.

Simple websites

At the most simplistic end of the technological spectrum are now a range of websites that help students linguistically in a range of areas, the most popular being English grammar and vocabulary. Here is a popular example:



<http://www.ego4u.com/>

These may be used to complement traditional learning in the classroom or be undertaken independently by a student who perceives that they have a weakness in a particular area.

More developed websites

More sophisticated sites take an integrated approach to skill sets. At the **BBC Words in the News** site:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/language/wordsinthenews/>

students can read and listen to a short current news item. There are also some pre-taught words to view. All that is missing from this input is something to activate student 'output', in other words, a way for the student to activate the words and phrases introduced both explicitly and implicitly. As a language teacher, you could do this through an active practice activity, such as a discussion, for example.

So, on a site like this, the teacher is still necessary to facilitate some meaningful practice tasks and, as such, it could be argued that this is where technology is at its best, when blended with teacher-led output.

Sites with interactive technology

Some of the most fascinating new developments in language learning and technology allow for much more interactivity. With the advent of greater broadband speeds and easier access to the internet, this is an area already in strong growth and set to become even more popular.

Blogs, forums and social media sites, such as twitter or Facebook, provide an ideal space to meet, connect and use English outside of the formal classroom. Many language schools now have their own Facebook pages, blogs and forums to encourage student to organisation communication.

Learners who wish to speak to a teacher can call for free anywhere in the world if both have Skype or similar VOIP internet phone. This has led to some innovative sites where language learners can communicate on a language exchange basis or browse for registered teachers and then pay for lessons with the teacher of their choice.

There are a few companies offering such options but we are going to focus on one of biggest by way of example: www.myngle.com



Lessons by Skype are supported by a 'virtual classroom', so students can see and hear their teacher and interact with learning materials. You can see a very short video clip showing what this looks like in practice here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRPIZ_K1q38&feature=related

At the time of writing, Myngle state that they teach 45 languages and over 218 teachers – but if you're thinking of joining them, be aware that they say they have a waiting list of over 1000 teachers.

Live Mocha (www.livemocha.com) is a more organised online language learning community which offers free and paid language courses and boasts '9 million members from 195 countries around the world.'

However, Skype offers additional features that the teacher can use to support mainly oral/aural lessons. As well as free telephone calls, Skype also provides an instant messenger system so words and phrases can be sent between teacher and student instantly, which is particularly useful for error correction. Broadband speed permitting, you can also see each other while you talk if you have a webcam and Skype's conferencing facility also allows others to join the call. All for free! Here is a brief summary of the features and benefits of Skype for language learning:

<http://www.onlinetutoringworld.com/technology/teflskype.htm>



You can also customise the teaching experience by adopting extra Skype plug-ins. Watch this handy video on how to do this here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40UEz61wLo8>

The availability of Skype (and other communication platforms) has meant that sometimes the exchanges between teachers and students are much less formal. Indeed, there is evidence that some Skype users shun any formalised teaching at all, in favour of 'conversation classes' with unpaid native or near native speakers, who are happy to volunteer their time or embark on informal language exchanges.

Online interactive lessons vs. the traditional classroom

So what is the difference between what is taught in the online environment and what is taught in the traditional EFL classroom?

Well, learners at our sister organisation Phone English, which specialises in teaching English one-to-one by telephone, tend to want more help with output. Quite often they have good mental knowledge but lack the context in which to put their English skills to use.



Thus, the Phone English lesson is primarily focussed on learner output rather than 'teaching English' and teachers look to refine and improve learner English in a functional sense. This focus is reflected in some of the material Phone English uses with its students. Here are three sample worksheets below:

<http://www.phone-english.net/documents/G101Grammar-Habitsandroutines.pdf>

<http://www.phone-english.net/documents/B101MakingIntroductionsandSmallTalk.pdf>

http://www.phone-english.net/documents/B104Introducingmybusiness_001.pdf

But just as impressive are the sites that allow teachers to create online tools for classes, such as crosswords, gap fills, matching exercises and word searches. Here is one example of a puzzle-making site:

<http://www.discoveryeducation.com/freepuzzlemaker/?CFID=12907063&CFTOKEN=89690933>

Some EFL teachers have written their own English language courses, which they run/manage and administer for free through Moodle. To find out more about the flexibility that this platform offers, take a look at: <http://moodle.org/>

